

Hope Reborn



CARYL
McADOO

Praying my story gives God glory!

[Reviews](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-one](#)

[Chapter Twenty-two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-one](#)

[Other Books](#)

[Coming soon](#)

[Contact Caryl](#)

Five Star Reviews of Book One

Vow Unbroken by Caryl McAdoo

With an intriguing plot line and well-developed characters, McAdoo, who's written nonfiction and children's fiction, delivers an engaging read for her first adult historical romance.
--*Publishers Weekly*

After reading Caryl McAdoo's story of Henry and Susannah in "VOW UNBROKEN," I felt like I'd had another adventure with Tom Sawyer and Becky, this time as young adults.
--Alan Daugherty: columnist *The News-Banner*

Caryl McAdoo is a new unique voice in historical Christian fiction. I fell in love with the characters from the very first page. They pulled me into their lives and kept me there through the whole interesting storyline. I found the setting authentic, and Caryl kept me turning pages. I know you'll love this book as well as I did.

--Lena Nelson Dooley, award winning, best-selling author of *Maggie's Journey*, *Mary's Blessing*, *Catherine's Pursuit* & many more novels

Loved this story! Fresh strong voice from Caryl McAdoo...most memorable character [heroine Sue Baylor] I've encountered in some time. Well plotted and nicely paced. There's a Louis L'Amour and All-American feel to Caryl's writing. Beautiful romance, one of the nicest I've seen in a while.

--Carrie Fancett Pagels, author
Return to Shirley Plantation, a Civil War romance

A Really "Wow" Debut Novel! I loved this book--fast paced, adventurous, and satisfyingly wholesome. Oh, you are going to love this book.

--Anne Baxter Campbell, author *The Truth Trilogy: The Roman's Quest*, *Marcus Varitor*, *Centurion*, and *The Truth Doesn't Die*

Five Star Reviews of Book Two Hearts Stolen by Caryl McAdoo

Christian Romantic Historical Western Adventure Fiction--a BIG genre for a whole lot of novel. I said it about Caryl McAdoo's debut "Vow Unbroken" and it goes for book 2, "Hearts Stolen". For me, McAdoo vaulted immediately into the ranks of a seasoned author--another great writer I'll follow closely.

"HEARTS STOLEN" evokes the slower 19th century pace, but with daily life and death risks. Trail topics include Texas statehood, land deals, rogue red men, outlaws, daily faith, farming and family. I wouldn't want to live then; but 'tis fun readin' 'bout. Book 2 works as a stand-alone, but definitely continues many characters' lives from earlier.

-- Howard "Doc" Wolfe, top Amazon reviewer

Caryl McAdoo is an entertaining storyteller! Early Texas history, action and adventure, and forbidden love are just a few of the threads that are woven together to create this compelling story. Hearts Stolen kept me up late, turning page after page, with an eagerness to know how the love story would end. I enjoyed this emotional journey of love and loss and look forward to continuing the trilogy in Hope Reborn!

--Britney Adams, reader, Texas

I thought Hearts Stolen is a great novel. I loved the characters, setting, history, and plot. I found the storyline quite unique. Just when I thought I knew how it will end, there was an unexpected twist. Highly recommended! 5 stars!

--Amy Campbell, reader, Salem, Virginia

I loved Unbroken Vow, the first book in this series, and I enjoyed this one every bit as much. The author makes you feel like you are actually in the midst of the story with an outstanding cast of characters, especially an enchanting 4 year old boy named Charley It tells a wonderful story of early Texas including the rescue of captives from the Indians, Texas Rangers, outlaws and early settlers, and there is plenty of adventure and romance. I wasn't ready for the story to end and I am definitely looking forward to Book 3 in the series.

--Ann Ellison, reader, Abilene, Texas

I thought Hearts Stolen is a great novel. I loved the characters,

setting, history, and plot. I found the storyline quite unique. Just when I thought I knew how it will end, there was an unexpected twist. Highly recommended! 5 stars!

--Amy Campbell, reader, Salem, Virginia

Get ready for a wild, uplifting, heart-tugging, page-turning ride. *Hearts Stolen*, a historical Christian Western Adventure Romance grabbed me at the start with Native Americans capturing the heroine, Sassy. Her feisty, fighting spirit will win your heart from page one. Immediately drawn in and mesmerized, I couldn't set the book down until the end. Actually burnt dinner because I couldn't cook and read at the same time. Forget eating, I ate this book up. Caryl McAdoo is a master storyteller who weaves in Texas history into a well-crafted plot with unforgettable and totally loved characters. I didn't think I'd enjoy another book as much as her first Novel, *Vow Unbroken*, but *Hearts Stolen* is even better.

--Holly Michael, author, *Crooked Lines*

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CARYL McADOO

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, places, characters, and events are products of the author's imaginations, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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For contact with the author or speaking engagements, please visit www.CarylMcAdoo.com

Dedication

Always, I pray my story gives God glory, and so I dedicate Hope Reborn to Him and to His Kingdom. I would never have any books out there were it not for Him. He continues to bless me with stories to send out into the world□

And then there's my Ron, always faithful to love and support and encourage me. He is my story in so many ways and most assuredly, the love of my life.

I remember the first time I saw him at the baseball park, playing a game at the River Bottoms in Irving. And the first time I spoke to him when he checked out a basketball from me on his lunch hour. He asked me out and we were a couple ever since that first date.

Our forty-eight years (forty-six married) haven't all been bliss. No relationship ever is. But God uses those times, too, to bind us together all the more. With His mercy and grace, we've made it through every trial and tribulation. I do love you, my Sweetest heart.

And to my mother, Naomi Ruth Cloyd Lawrence, January 9, 1931 through August 2, 1997, who loved me like no one else. I was so blessed to be her only child for eight years and her bright and shining star. She taught me to love God by word and example, and diligently prayed me through the years. Still missing her every day, I anticipate our reunion in eternity.

I love you, Mama.

Acknowledgements

All the glory for anything I accomplish belongs to my Heavenly Father who loves me so and never ceases to amaze me. His blessings and favor are evident in my life as He constantly showers me with blessings, mercy, and grace and often provides what I need before I'm even aware of it.

Every person named below; God brought into my life. Words aren't enough to express how I'm blessed by their love and help.

To mention my Ron in every acknowledgement is a must. I can't gush over him enough, without my dear husband, his support and encouragement and help (yes, he's a writer, too), there'd never be any stories for you to enjoy!

God definitely sent Lenda Selph, the proofreader straight from Heaven, my own personal comma-kazi lady and sister-in-Christ. I might think she was an angel unaware, but I've met her husband Terry and visited in their beautiful home.

Thank you, Kirk DouPonce of DogEared Design for creating my beautiful cover. I love working with such a gifted Christian brother.

All my beta readers, Louise Koiner, Leah Jones, Telena and Holly, and my eVALUaters, and everyone who leaves a review at Amazon and Goodreads, clicks 'Share' and 'Like' on Facebook, Tweets, and recommends my books to friends. I need y'all and thank y'all and know God will bless you for blessing me! My cup literally overflows!

My Hope is in You, Lord. ...Caryl

“Hope deferred maketh the heart sick: but when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life..”

Proverbs 13:12

“It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord.”

Lamentations 3:26

“For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.”

Romans 15:4

“In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began;”

Titus 1:2

“Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ;”

I Peter 1:13

Chapter



One

Texas.

May smiled at the Tribune's headline, "Fillmore Says Pay Texas Off." Even the President was thinking about the new state. She returned her gaze to the line close to the bottom of the front page.

Could it be that more than one Henry Buckmeyer lived in Texas? She seriously doubted it, and that settled the matter. She was going west.

"Chester, would you come in here, please?"

While she waited, she reread the article that lacked the prominence due—in her estimation. It hadn't changed. The man's name stared back at her in bold type.

"Chester." She hated raising her voice. "Where are you?"

For a minute more, she tapped her nails in a rapid syncopation—little finger to index—on her desk. Finally, she stood. Where had he gotten off to? And what could he be doing?

Before she reached it, her parlor's left side door opened. "Did you need me, ma'am?"

"Yes, I wanted to know if you read that article I gave you about the exploits of those two Texas Rangers."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well? What did you think?"

"Interesting. Might be a novel there, but really, ma'am, not your sort of story. Is it?"

"Well, I don't see why not." She headed back to her chair with the man following then flopped into it. "Oh, Chester." She massaged her face, thumbs on her jaws.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"I'm so sick of snooty-prude ladies doing whatever they can think of to trick stuffy-shirted men into marriage." Her hands went high into the air in defiance then relaxed into a stretch. "Really. I can't write another."

He looked around the rather large room; it tickled her that the New York mansion's grandeur still impressed him, always had. "But those stories do pay the bills."

She hated that everything always boiled down to gold coins. "Ah,

but certainly, there's got to be more to life than money."

"Well said, if you have plenty."

The last thing she wanted this evening was to get into a debate over dollars. Besides, she didn't like to think of herself as having plenty, as he put it.

"Fine. I'll capitulate. Life requires filthy lucre. There. Now if you're happy, how about you remove a handsome amount out of the safe for me? I'm going to Texas."

"What?" He grinned, and his snowy teeth glistened as white as any of her heroes'. "No. Millicent May. Texas is unruly, primitive. And there are wild Indians. You cannot."

She glared. "Do not call me that, you know better." Clearing her throat, she smoothed her hair, pushing up a curl, and willed herself calm and reserved. "And do not presume to tell me what I can—or cannot—do. Please."

He lifted his brows and tucked his chin a bit, but only looked at her, didn't speak.

"So why not?"

"Texas came into the Union as a slave state, ma'am."

"What does that matter? It has nothing to do with anything."

"And, you have a deadline looming. A manuscript to finish?"

"Oh, pshaw, I can write anywhere." She picked up the newspaper, turned it upside-down to her, then pushed it toward him, touching it halfway down. "See what it says?"

He leaned over her desk. "Fillmore's definitely an advocate."

"Yes, of course, but that isn't what I was talking about. Look there by my finger."

He read the copy where she pointed. "What about Henry Buckmeyer?"

"Don't you remember your daddy's last letter?"

"Yes, ma'am. Are you speaking of him mentioning a Patty Buckmeyer whom he ran into some place up on the Red River. Jonesboro, if I remember. Said he'd known the man during the war."

"Well?"

He shook his head. "Bound to be lots of Buckmeyers."

She smiled, loved knowing something he didn't. For a few sweet seconds, she savored the moment then puckered and nodded.

"Well, one Patrick Henry Buckmeyer fought the bloody British with Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans. The exact same place your daddy won his freedom in 1814. This Henry has got to be the same man."

"Maybe, but Texas is still a slave state, ma'am."

"I could care less, doesn't matter one iota. I want us to go."

He leaned back and closed his eyes. She considered jumping up

and shaking him until he agreed, but she wouldn't. She was too much a lady for such shenanigans, and he didn't like to be touched.

Finally, he opened his eyes then leaned his nappy head all the way back until he faced the ceiling. "May, May, May."

"Chester."

When he came back level, locking his eyes onto hers, he spread his full lips in what vaguely passed as a crooked smile. "Is there any argument that I might use to talk you out of this crazy idea?"

"No, not one. I am going, whether you join me or not. Are you? Will you? Please come along. It would be so hard without you."

He put one fist on his hip, shook his head again, and exhaled a long slow breath. "Alright then, yes, ma'am. Shall I make the travel arrangements?"

"Yes, please. I want to leave as soon as possible." She rubbed her hands together. "Oh, this is going to be exciting. Isn't it?"

In a totally bland tone and with a face as straight as a carpenter's chalk line, he gazed intently. "Oh, yes, ma'am. Hoorah." He turned and headed out.

"Chester."

He stopped, but didn't turn around. "Yes, ma'am?"

"When it is only you and me, there's no need for you to use your houseboy manners."

"Yes, ma'am. I know." He strolled out. Seemed to her a bit lighter on his feet, even if he acted like he didn't want to go.

She loved needling him, almost as much as he loved playing the part of her faithful freedman. She'd expected more resistance. Why, he hadn't put up much of a scrap at all.

Down deep, he was probably as excited as she. Past time to have a fine adventure, being cramped up in this gilded cage had gotten old.

The next two days passed in a flurry. To make her editor happy, she sat her high European-fashioned, bustled bottom in her chair and slung ink like a madwoman.

She hated the drivel she blabbered onto the pieces of innocent, pure white paper, but she'd taken the money, and so she scribbled. How many times had she written a crippled variation of the exact same tale?

The first four or five novels were fun, even exhilarating. But lately, boring wasn't a strong enough word.

Midmorning of the third day, both parlor doors flung open. Chester nodded toward the front of the house. "Everything is loaded, ma'am; we need to leave in the next half hour."

She laid her quill pen down, blotted the last page she'd been working on, then stood. "Excellent."

She wiggled the page in the air and blew on it. After a credible

time when the ink should be dry, she stuffed it in her leather grip. "I'm ready."

Of course he hired a carriage with a matched pair of high-stepping steeds. Her Chester loved fancy horses and throwing her money around. No wonder he wanted her to keep scribing love stories.

The driver turned into Central Park then whipped the pair into a stiff trot; she leaned back against the well padded, velvet seats. Well, she certainly liked nice things, too.

And also, she supposed begrudgingly, possessed a certain persona to uphold. But then, at this time of day, no one would be at the train station anyway.

Past the park, the man turned the wrong way. She stuck her ankle-high, laced, way-too-expensive boot out and tapped Chester's shin. "He's going the wrong direction. Say something."

He pushed her foot away then scooted from dead center of the opposite seat to the window, positioning himself athwart. "No, ma'am, he knows exactly where he's going."

"But, Chester, the train station is the other way. Have him turn around, or we'll surely be late and miss our train. Is that your ploy?"

"I will not, ma'am. Our destination is not the train, you see. I booked us on the S.S. Georgia, we sail in –"

He pulled out his gold pocket watch, the one she'd given him, what? Twelve—no fifteen years before, right after that first big royalty check.

"Exactly fifty-seven minutes. More than adequate." He replaced the timepiece and stared out the window.

She hated him having any upper hand. She studied his mirthless eyes, and his full lips betrayed nothing. "Exactly why, may I ask, are we sailing on the Georgia instead of taking the train west?"

"The Georgia, a magnificent side-wheel steamboat, will have us in New Orleans in ten days. Time we may actually enjoy, ma'am."

"It sounds delightful, but...."

"From there Jefferson, Texas, is five days or less up the Red River by way of the Mississippi, and then a mere hundred miles by stagecoach on to Clarksville." He lifted his chin in a rather arrogant, haughty, uppity manner.

She liked it, but hoped he wouldn't use it too much. "But I love trains."

"I know, but Texas by rail would take twice as long."

"Why a steamboat? Wouldn't a clipper be faster?"

"Not necessarily."

"Well, why New Orleans? I thought you hated that city."

"I do, but Pa loved the place. He might have gone back."

A day or two in the French Quarter wouldn't be so objectionable;

especially if Chester could find his father. Most likely, he'd enjoy playing detective, asking around, and she could.... No.

She crumpled that notion and threw it in her mental wastebasket where it belonged along with so many unwritten scenes. "Do you honestly think he's still alive? Could he be?"

"He'd only be sixty. It's possible."

Counting, she pressed her fingers then toes ever so slightly. He hated it when she did it openly, no need to antagonize him. Still, words were her forte, numbers raked her brain.

She shook her head. "I believe you might be mistaken. By my calculations, he'd be in his seventies, wouldn't he?"

"He's only fourteen years older than me. To think your mother made the mistake of educating him."

"That was no mistake. Why would you say such a thing?"

"Maybe not a mistake. But definitely illegal, at least according to the State of Virginia. They have laws against it."

"So? I guess that makes me a criminal, too?"

"Not so in New York, ma'am. But extradition agreements do exist between all the states."

He seemed to want to say more, but fell silent. Probably thinking about New Orleans and how he'd go about discovering if his father had indeed gone back. She loved the town and its casinos.

Could she handle it though? Or five days on a Mississippi River Boat for that matter. Perhaps she should forget the whole idea. Call the trip off before she got any further.

The coach slowed then came to a stop. Shortly, the driver opened the door and stepped aside. Moored at the end of a rather long wharf, a side-wheel steamboat glistened in the late morning sun.

It looked brand new. White clouds of smoke belched from its double stacks. Ah, she was beautiful, such great fodder for a story.

A little tingle ran up her spine.

No, no, absolutely not would she end the trip before it began. A grand adventure awaited, and along her way, she'd gather enough material for at least two, maybe three novels.

Inside, she giggled like a little girl, but outwardly, gave Chester a demure, approving smile. No, indeed. She was going west.

The S.S. Georgia proved magnificent, beat the nines all to the devil and back. Perhaps she should ask how much he paid, but then what did it matter? It was done, and she assumed she could afford it.

The tickets had been purchased after all. If she ended bankrupt and in the poor house, at least she'd be in Texas; besides, it would be all Chester's fault this time.

Her two-room suite on the third deck practically took her breath away, much fancier than her own bedroom and the parlor back home.

Dinner, served almost as she boarded, tasted divine.

After putting away the rest of her things, he placed her valise on the writing table, took out the manuscript, ink well and quill pen.

“Anything else, ma’am?”

“Yes, please. I need another forty thousand words. Have any idea where I might pick some up?”

“May I suggest the same place you obtained all the others?”

“Oh Chester, Chester, Chester. I was afraid you might say something completely and dreadfully useless like that. Why can’t you ever tell me what I want to hear?”

He grinned, bowed, then backed out like a real butler, and like she was a real lady.

“Where’s your room?”

He stopped at her door. “Directly across the hall. Supper’s at eight, ma’am. A warning bell will sound.” He bowed his head. “You should be able to cut that forty by a third before reclining for the night.”

She curled her lip. “Work, work, work. You’re such a slave driver.”

He smiled again and closed her door.

No way could she write that fast, much less think of that much for her arrogant, mindless heroes and her whiny coy heroines to do or say. That’s it.

She’d have them marry, say I do, and be done with the lot of them. Too bad the contract she’d signed clearly spelled out one hundred thousand hard-won words.

Why, oh why, had she accepted the advance?

She slipped out of her skirt and bustle then plopped into the chair. It didn’t even swivel, and the seat cushion wasn’t soft enough, and... now who was being whiny? She smiled.

After all, weren’t all the well-rounded characters she created at least a tad like her? She hefted her hiney to the back of the seat cushion and straightened the blank pages.

No time for complaining and whining.

She stared at the last page she’d worked on, reread it, and picked up the pen. She carefully opened the ink well then tickled her chin with the feather. The tickle never failed.

An idea emerged, and she dipped the quill in the offending black liquid. Soon flowing phrases filled the page. Like soldiers marching to a sure death, the letters formed their lines and hurried to their boring demise.

Doing what paid so well, she started mussing the next pristine white paper page.

Two wrong turns and five hundred decent words later, the supper

bell rang and set her loose from the chains of her imagined dungeon. Shortly, Chester followed her down to the grand dining hall.

He located then held her chair out. Once seated, he scooted her closer to the table then backed away.

She nodded at the woman to her right. "Good evening, ma'am." Then bent her wrist and extended her hand to the gentleman on her left. "Hello, May Meriwether, sir. Good evening."

He took her fingers ever so gently. "The same May Meriwether who killed her husband last year?"

Chapter



Two

May wanted to say yes, and ask the idiot if he might be interested in being husband number eight, but instead, smiled her best parlor room grin. “Me?” She shook her head and laughed.

“No, not me. And I’ve never heard a murdering May Meriwether was on the loose. Now, I readily admit that I have killed off a few husbands alright, but only on the printed page.”

For too long, the man stared before recognition came. “Oh, so you’re a writer.”

Ding, ding, ding. “Yes, precisely though, I prefer novelist. I pen romantic tales of intrigue and love in faraway places; at least those who appreciate fine literature tell me such.”

The lady across the table leaned forward. “Oh, how exciting, I know you.” She leaned forward and glanced past her to the gentleman. “She’s a wonderful, famous author.”

The gentleman who still remained unknown, as he’d not taken the springboard she’d so graciously provided, only nodded, and the woman looked back to her. “I love your books, Mis’ess Meriwether.”

“It’s ‘miss,’ but please, won’t you call me May?” She smiled. “And thank you.”

For appearance sake, she chatted with her shipmates through four courses followed by a delicious tapioca custard. Then, as soon as the first lady excused herself, May became the second.

Chester was nowhere. Well, he was somewhere, but searching the dining hall on her way out, she never spotted him. She strolled toward the stairs. Ah, a most pleasant sound called her name.

Shuffling pasteboards stopped her short. Right there, in a good sized smoke-filled room, fifteen to twenty men sat around three felt-covered tables. She stepped closer and listened.

Should she?

“Millicent May Meriwether.”

She spun, glaring. Chester stood just out of swing reach; she leaned in. “Do not call me that. Aloud? And in a public place? What’s gotten into you? That’s twice in the same week.”

“It’s your name. Remember? I was there when you were born.”

“Give me some money.”

He nodded toward the room then pulled out a handful of gold coins, but didn’t pass them to her. “When these are gone, you’re done.”

Agreed?"

She hated his insinuation that she'd be a loser. An excellent judge of character, she considered herself far above average at the game of poker.

"Fine, but you ought to have more confidence in me. Agreed." She opened and held out her palm.

He dropped the coins. "Don't forget those forty thousand moneymakers you need to produce."

"How could I with the likes of you around?"

Shaking his head as he went, he climbed the stairs.

She strolled in, and all heads turned. The hum of conversation went silent. She beamed her best, innocent, what-are-you-naughty-boys-doing smile. "Evening, gentleman. Might there be a seat for a lady at one of your tables?"

The night proved too short, but profitable. The next morning at breakfast, she returned the original coins to Chester with a straight face. "Here, oh ye of little faith."

"A heathen shouldn't quote the good book."

She curled her upper lip. "I'll have you know that I am not a heathen, I'm agnostic."

"Seems to me such a fine, intelligent lady would have reconciled with her Creator in forty-one-years' time."

"Hush your nasty mouth. Really, what has gotten into you calling me by my first name, and now shouting my age for anyone to hear?" She straightened her back in the chair. "Besides, I don't look a day over thirty-three."

"Like I said before, I attended your birth, ma'am. I know all your secrets."

She resisted the urge to snarl. "If you truly were, you were only five, how much could you remember?" He had supposedly attended her birth—at least that's what her mother claimed, but could anyone know someone else's heart of hearts? She held out her coffee cup. He filled it. "Would you be so kind as to inquire when the card room opens this evening?"

"Yes, ma'am. And I will say my age is precisely why I do remember that day. Quite traumatic." He grinned. "Anything else?"

"Well, yes. Can you please see if you can get me a better dinner seat?"

"Of course. Anything else."

"No, I suppose not, except to get out. Maybe I can knock out a few hundred words."

"Yes, ma'am, but a few thousand would be better."

She waved him off. "Go away. The Egyptians treated the Hebrews better than you treat me."

He did, and she went to work. Halfway through wringing her boring fifth page from her overworked imagination, a knock pulled her from the south of France. She scooted her chair back.

Had he lost his key? She hated interruptions when on a roll. “Chester?”

Another knock reverberated. That one a bit louder. “Miss Meriwether?”

It sounded nothing like him. She walked to the door. “Yes, who is it?”

“The purser, ma’am. May I have a word?”

“Yes, of course.” She smoothed and straightened her dress then fluffed her tendrils a bit before opening it. “Good evening, sir. What do you need?”

He nodded once. “Good evening, ma’am. The Captain would enjoy the pleasure of your company tonight at his table.”

“Interesting.” Chester had outdone himself. “What is this costing me?”

The man stiffened. “Captain Orr doesn’t sell seats, ma’am.”

“Really? Even more interesting. Of course, I’ll be pleased to join him.” She closed the door, then went straight to her closet and examined the meager dress choices Chester had packed for her. She hated dinner dates.

Why had the man invited her? What if he’d read her books? She geared her stories to female audiences and never understood why a man would want to read them anyway.

Several had gotten downright gushy over her thinking that her heroines characterized herself. The cad. Of course she put a bit of herself into each one, but how ridiculous for them to expect....

She tried to produce a mental image of the man, but couldn’t. Now she did like men in uniform, but a sailor? How could one ever maintain a relationship with someone who was always gone?

Men, she hated the hairy brutes. Why had this one invited her to dine with him? What exactly were his intentions?

Maybe she’d won some lottery. Could be that he pulled her name from a hat. Or perhaps, he invited everyone aboard sooner or later?

The sitting room’s door opened, then Chester-sized footfalls preceded a knock on her bedroom door. “Ma’am.”

“What? I’m busy.”

“It’s almost eight. Do you require any assistance?”

She rejected the notion of changing again, resisted the urge to put on more perfume, then opened the door.

His lips thinned into what was almost a smile. He nodded. “Well done, ma’am. I knew that sapphire blue was a good choice. You appear more than ready—and very beautiful I might add. Shall we

go?"

"The purser said this invite didn't cost me anything, is that true?"

"Yes, ma'am."

At the dining room, the purser rushed toward her the minute she appeared in the doorway. "Good evening, ma'am. Kindly follow me."

Flanked front and rear, she proceeded through the huge room to a fancy schmancy, half-full table. The embossed linen cloth hung to the floor and literally glittered with all the china, crystal, and silver. An elegant, but simple, candelabra in the center held several flickering candles.

Quite impressive, indeed.

All the men at the table rose. She smiled demurely as she'd seen Queen Victoria do in newspaper photographs. The purser led her around to his boss' right.

Captain Orr extended his hand. "Miss Meriwether, welcome. So glad you could join me this evening."

She lightly took his fingertips. "My pleasure, sir. Gentlemen." She nodded acknowledgement while the purser pulled her chair out. She sat, and he pushed her back up to the table before she nodded toward each woman. "Good evening, ladies."

The handsome man sitting at the head of the table exchanged small pleasantries with her and the others at his table, but offered no clue as to why he'd singled her out, then had her seated on his right.

A bit older than expected, if she had to guess, she'd put him in his early sixties. Hard to tell with his full beard though. Not a lot of gray, but enough to add interest.

The guest across from her smiled. "My wife loves your books."

She gave him her why-are-you-talking-to-me smile. "Thank you. Always good to know I have satisfied readers out there."

He nodded, apparently flustered she didn't take his cue and launch into some brilliant and entertaining dissertation on her great works of fiction. He turned to the captain.

"Are we still making good time? For the life of me, I can't figure out how you know how fast we're going."

The seaman expounded upon a rather interesting explanation of determining speed on the open waters. What was a sexton? Maybe Chester knew. The Captain concluded with the fact they were making sixteen knots an hour, then faced her.

"Miss Meriwether, there's something I need to know."

She smiled. "And that would be?"

"I understand you enjoy gambling, which leads me to a distasteful question. Do you cheat?"

Well, now she knew. She laughed genuinely. "Are the losers whining?"

“There’s been some talk, specifically over that big pot you won with a pair of lowly sixes.”

“A true gentleman would not be questioning a lady’s honor, or at least in my world, they don’t. But as the master of this vessel, I acknowledge that you do have a certain obligation to inquire.” She smiled.

“I appreciate your understanding.”

“Cheating at cards would take all the fun out of it.” She leaned in closer and lowered her voice. “I noted the bluff coming in the aforementioned hand of stud.”

“I see.”

“The obviously poor loser represented a pair of kings from the start, but the three other monarchies were soon accounted for. I’m a hard lady to bamboozle.”

“Indeed.” He gave her a slight nod. “You play any other games besides poker, ma’am?”

“I do, and you?”

“I enjoy a game of chess and several card games.”

“Backgammon?”

“Of course.” He grinned. “After dessert, would you care to accompany me to my stateroom and try your luck?”

She studied the man for a moment then leaned in close. “Are you proposing to place me in a compromising situation? I don’t care to have my reputation sullied.”

“Of course not, but I understand how tongues wag. Bring your man, or I’ll have my purser play chaperone if that’s satisfactory.”

She insisted both of them attend, but it disappointed her somewhat that Chester seemed to enjoy himself chatting with the seaman in the far corner.

She, on the other hand, experienced a most frustrating evening matching wits with the captain and hated it immensely that when the agreed quitting time arrived, she had to fork over a few gold coins from her previous nights’ winnings.

At the door, she extended her hand. “Perhaps a rematch.”

He took her bent fingers and smiled. “Tomorrow evening soon enough?”

“Yes.” She pulled her hand away. “I’ll be looking forward to it.”

That night, waiting for sleep to find her, May replayed the evening. The captain proved a worthy opponent, but was he really after more?

Should she tell the man she’d never been married, or really even in love? No, it would probably cost her a seat at his table if his real motive was to separate her from her bloomers.

He probably made a habit of picking an out-of-the-ordinary lady

on every journey, one who traveled alone, to get into his bed. Well, that wasn't going to happen with her.

Having waited this long, she certainly wanted it all, or else she'd have none of it.

The next three mornings and afternoons dragged by in a sea of ink and pure white paper. While the evenings proved most invigorating, and even though a bit profitable, too short.

Several times, it seemed Captain Orr intended to lead her down a path that would end in his bed, but she coyly thwarted his real or imagined advances at each turn.

Toward the end of her fifth evening at sea, over a game of cribbage, he rather nonchalantly announced in quite a condescending tone, "Tomorrow when we dock in Havana, I'm going to insist that you remain on board, ma'am."

She resisted the urge to tell him she would do no such thing, and instead, decided to play the helpless southern belle she'd been born to and offered her demure Victorian smile.

"Why, Captain, explain if you will why in the world I would want to do that. I've been looking forward to seeing Cuba for myself, especially since our new President Fillmore intends to buy the island from the Spanish. Who knows when I might have the opportunity again? Why indeed would you insist any such thing?"

Chapter

Three

The captain filled his lungs then looked over May's head like he couldn't believe she challenged his authority. After a bit too long, he lowered his gaze.

"Havana is rife with all kinds of tropical diseases, ma'am. Why expose yourself? We'll only be there long enough to take on fresh water and a few hundred tons of coal."

"He's right, May; it's not worth the risk."

She turned in her chair and stared at Chester. She hated it when he sided against her. He knew better. She turned back. "Perhaps I'll consider your request."

"Perhaps you should." He held her eyes then the slightest grin turned the corners of his thin lips. He moved his cribbage peg forward. "The island is not New York, ma'am."

"You don't say."

Ignoring her tone, he added an argument. "Local customs do not allow a lady to walk the streets alone. I'd hate for you to be locked in their calaboose when the time came for the Georgia to cast off."

Her faced warmed. "Chester would accompany me to thwart any such action were I to decide to explore a bit. Don't worry over me, Captain."

Not soon enough for her, the quitting time came. It gave her a bit of satisfaction that the settlement put her way ahead for the four sessions.

He dropped the mixture of gold and notes into her outstretched hand. "Until tomorrow? I request another rematch."

"Of course, where else would I be?"

She held her tongue until Chester opened the door to her suite. "I hate it when you take someone else's side, and you know it."

"I do, but he was actually taking my side. I didn't bring it up earlier, but going ashore wasn't an option."

"What? Why not?"

"Forget disease being a constant threat, I won't accompany you. I don't like manual labor."

She stepped through and nodded him inside. Once the oil lamp's glow lit the room and the door closed, she faced him. "Why are you babbling on about manual labor? You haven't worked a day in your life."

"Not true, but that's a different debate. What's at issue is that Cuba is overrun with slave traders, and if half the stories I've heard are true, a man of color such as myself is more than likely to be branded a runaway and sold before the cock crows."

She smirked. "The scalawags couldn't put you in the field. I wouldn't let them."

He sneered right back. "You? How could you stop them? You heard the captain; it's against the law for an unoccupied female to even be on the streets of Havana."

"You believed that? It couldn't be true. Why, it's the nineteenth century for goodness sake."

"Ask the purser if you don't think so. Besides, all the more time to write."

She waved him off. "Go away, you men are such...." She clinched her teeth, not wanting to lump her Chester in with all the other hairy brutes. "I was looking forward to seeing Havana."

He nodded and backed toward the door. "I know."

"Breakfast, then?"

He nodded again then was gone.

Once she snuffed the bedside lamp and slipped under the covers, the last bit of hope that Captain Orr could possibly be a suitable mate disappeared. She wanted a husband, not a father.

She did like the man's beard though. Maybe she should insist that any suitor not shave. What would kissing a man with a mustache be like? Certainly, she wouldn't be finding out with the Captain.

Within a perfectly good sleep vision, she doubled over in pain. An awful cramp racked her abdomen so badly she couldn't straighten. The dream's storyline fractured, and she curled in a fetal position.

A knock drew her toward consciousness; she snuggled deeper into her pillows. A louder rap echoed through her room and settled right between her eyes.

"Go away."

Her bedroom door opened. "May, are you sick?"

She rolled over, scooted up in the bed, and pulled her knees up. Wrapping her arms around them, she glared at him. "Yes, get your pistol and put me out of my misery."

"I didn't bring it. Want coffee?"

A tear rolled down her cheek. "No." A sob escaped. "He's not the one."

"I could have told you that."

She held her hand out. He took it. "I love you, Chester."
"I know."

Coffee and breakfast in bed helped some, but the indisputable fact that she wasn't pregnant and had no prospects weighed heavy on her soul. Was her fate to never know true romantic love, never wake up with a lawfully wedded husband curled beside her?

A light rap sounded at her door. "Ma'am?"

"What Chester? Did you find a gun? Surely the purser has one."

"No, I have something better. Can we come in?"

We? Who did the scoundrel have with him? "No! Go away."

The door opened a bit. "Cover yourself, we're coming in."

She pulled the satin spread to her neck. If he was going to act like this, she needed her own pistol. He stepped in then pointed at a spot in front of her bed. "Put it there."

Two stewards dressed in all white carried in a metal bath. The pair of burly men set it down then retreated without looking her direction. Right behind them, maids hurried in carrying pitchers of lovely hot water.

Once they filled the tub with steamy liquid gold and the small army he had mustered vanished, she smiled. "Oh, Chester, you spoil me so."

He draped two fluffy towels over her bedside chair, nodded then backed out. "Yes, ma'am."

Though she really didn't care to play with Orr that evening, she decided it wouldn't be sporting not to give the man a chance to win his money back. Then again, his bossy behavior the night before had taken the fun out of it.

She'd known all along he wasn't the one, but giving him the opportunity to change her mind had been somewhat intriguing, even pleasurable. Now she only wanted to punish him, teach him that he had no business telling her what she could and could not do.

Insist indeed. Who did the man think he was anyway?

Certainly not the captain of her ship.

Each night's victories invigorated the next day's ink slinging. Her story took on an edge that it had lacked. Then another problem raised its ugly head. Should she stop there and go back?

The first half of the manuscript probably needed to be reworked. After a lovely breakfast in her room with Chester on the morning of her last full day at sea, she broached the subject.

"Well, what do you think?"

He refilled her coffee cup. "I think the ladies who read your stories will love it."

"You're just saying that. What do you really think? Don't try to spare my feelings."

“When have I ever done such?”

“Tell me, chowderhead! What do you think?”

He tapped the table several times then shrugged. “The last two chapters are far superior to the first twenty-four, but we’re docking tomorrow morning, and well, it would be nice to post this before we leave New Orleans.”

“Well, you can forget that. I can’t wrap it up that quickly, and I do want this one to be –” She stopped herself. While she’d love to be done with it, not have the deadline hanging over her head, she would once again be without a contract, and that remained the only thing worse than having one.

“Better? That the word you were searching for?”

“Yes.”

“Best rework it then.”

“How much time do I have?”

“Enough, I’ll telegraph your editor from New Orleans.”

She resisted the urge to hug his neck. He hated her being demonstrative. “Excellent, thank you.”

“Ma’am, there’s another matter.”

“What now?”

“The captain, ma’am. He’s requested a few moments in private with you.”

His words pushed her to the back of her chair. What could the man want? After the first couple of nights, he had refrained from any hints at a side trip to his bed. “Have any idea what he’s after?”

“A loan perhaps?”

She laughed. Wouldn’t that be ace high? Should she insist on a signed contract, or be adamant she didn’t loan money to losers like him?

“No, I don’t think so. The man plays for the fun of it. He’s never offered to up the stakes. I don’t think that’s what it is. What else could it be?”

“A proposal?” He held the china coffee cruse up. “What shall I tell the purser?”

She declined more java. “I will require you in the next room, but with that provision, a few minutes alone will be fine so far as I’m concerned. Wouldn’t that meet with your approval?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The words flowed that morning and almost put themselves on the page. She loved it when the little darlings did that. If only she could write faster, and her hand didn’t get so tired.

Should she perhaps hire a scribe? No. She didn’t need more people in her life. She liked things exactly the way they were, just her and Chester.

Who needed a husband anyway?

She set her pen down. Tears welled then trickled down her cheek. She did, that's who, and before her whole life slipped away.

In the deepest sanctums of her inner being, she longed to be a mother, though she'd never told a soul. Not even Chester. If the captain really wanted to get her alone so he could propose, should she settle?

Images of a little bearded baby tickled away the tears. She rather liked the facial hair, but had never wanted to settle. She wanted the entirety of the perfect happy endings she wrote over and over.

Not one of her heroines missed having it all, not one. And she never gave one of them just any man, but the right one. She gave her protagonists the man she could fall so deeply in love with that her life would be perfect until she died.

So why couldn't she meet the perfect forever man to marry?

Shouldn't she at least be equal with all the women she'd created on the page? Hers was not the captain. The dream man who'd sweep her off her feet would never boss her around.

She hated it when a brute thought he knew what was best for her just because hair covered his face and chest. Life was so unfair.

She reconsidered.

Millicent May Orr. He'd surely have to hear her first name. She'd hate that. Maybe she could change him. Were she to explain how much she hated being told what to do, that she had no need for another father, would he promise to refrain?

May Orr. Dear Heavens, she'd sound like a grimy politician, and at only the city level. She'd certainly have to keep her maiden name for a pseudonym. Why, with May Orr on the cover of her books, her readers might even think a man wrote a romance story!

How absurd.

They would giggle themselves silly.

After only three dress changes, she found herself at the captain's supper table sitting in what had become her place to his right. She picked at broiled fish and drank no wine whatsoever.

Nothing should dampen her resolve to tell the man flat out that she would not marry him. If indeed, that's what plagued his bearded mind.

Should she let him kiss her? Just once, so she'd know exactly what it felt like to have all that hair against her face? She imagined it would tickle her lips.

Through dessert and the short stroll to his state room with Chester and the purser a respectable distance behind them, she contemplated that question. Could one mustached kiss weaken her resolve? Best not chance it.

The door closed. Her heart fluttered then beat faster. Alone with the man.

He took her hand. Would he fall to one knee? "Sweet May, these last few days have been so much fun, exhilarating."

"I've enjoyed most of it." She tilted her head ever so slightly as she'd had so many heroines do, and offered the hint of a smile. "Especially the winning part."

He smiled as if he'd been letting her win, but that would be a lie. "I have a proposition for you. I own a home in New Orleans."

Proposition? That was an odd word. Proposition, proposal—same root. Still, a very strange selection. Surely he couldn't possibly be insinuating a liaison without the benefits of marriage.

How would he think for one minute that she'd agree to be his kept woman? Steam bubbled up from her gut, but she would afford him the benefit of doubt.

Be certain of his intentions before she slapped him. "Really?"

"Yes, and on Bourbon Street. I've always loved New Orleans. It's a rather large home."

Why would she think such a thing just because he used one wrong word? After all, he was a gentleman. He'd given her no reason to believe he might suggest such a sortie.

A tingle danced up her spine, and her pulse quickened even more. "Well, that's interesting. I love most of New Orleans."

"We lay over there for three days, before we sail on to Panama."

"I see. It's very nice that you have a house to stay in."

"Yes." He smiled again, but this grin held a more sinister gleam. "I've read two of your novels this past week. I can hear your voice."

His confession took her back. "You have? Well, what did you think?"

"That there's something lacking."

"Lacking?" She pulled her hand away. So this was why he wanted to get her alone. Tell her how to fix her books. How could she have been so stupid? "And tell me, in your opinion, exactly what would that be?"

"There's a certain passion missing, but that's what I'm offering. Leave Chester here on the Georgia and come home with me. Call it research for your next book. Put some steam on your pages."

She backed away.

"You are no gentleman. If I wanted to trash my novels, I wouldn't need the likes of you for my exploring." She gave him her best you'll-never-know-what-you're-missing smile then slipped out of the door—and his life.

Chapter

Four

May didn't say a word until Chester unlocked her door. "Get us a drink, would you, please."

"Yes, ma'am." He spun around and unlocked his door. Before she had the second lamp lit, he returned with a nice-sized bottle.

"What's that?"

"Rum, the sailor's drink of choice."

"Fine, pour me a double."

He poured, she drank and motioned for more. He poured again, and she flopped into her writing chair. Either it had conformed to her derriere or vice-versa, but she would miss sitting in it.

About the only thing she'd miss about the miserable ship. She sipped the hard liquor. It burned a bit, but did have a pleasant aftertaste. "This liquor is pretty good. Rum, you say?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"He wanted me to leave you on board and spend three days with him in his Bourbon Street hideaway."

"Did he mention his wife?"

"No, you knew that he was married and didn't tell me?"

"The purser told me while you two were having your little chat."

She drained her glass then held it out toward him. "I should have known. The philandering fool."

He splashed her only a daub, not nearly enough. "It's why he didn't offer to take you ashore in Havana. That's where she lives and oversees their sugarcane plantation."

"The purser told you all that?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I hate men."

He smiled at her. "No you don't, you love us."

She curled her lip. He knew her so well, and she hated that. But he was right, as usual, though she'd never admit it aloud. What a shame that her life's path had not crossed with Mister Right's.

"He also insulted my novels, said they lacked passion, that I needed experience."

“Yes, ma’am.”

“What do you mean, yes, ma’am? My books have plenty of passion. Do not tell me, Chester, that you are agreeing with that... that... swine.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Again, you yes-ma’am me? Stop being condescending.” She held her glass out. “Fill it, now.”

He gave her another splash, only a bit more than last time. “What did you tell him?”

She smiled and savored the memory for a bit before she shared. “That if I wanted to trash up my stories, I wouldn’t need any research with the likes of him.”

“Good for you.”

A sob welled, she turned her lips down, holding it back, sniffed once then met his eye. Her belly burned. “I thought he was going to propose.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Such a cad, he is. I should have slapped him.”

“No, ma’am. Why would a lady sully herself that way?”

“Are you trying to be my mother?”

“No, but she did say that a lot.”

She took another sip and closed her eyes. For years, she’d been unable to pull her mother’s image to mind. Sometimes, she caught a glimpse of her in the mirror—when she only glanced or in her peripheral vision.

Other times, in her dreams, she could see her, even talk with her, but never when she really needed her.

“Yes, she did. What a shame she didn’t take her own advice.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“But, if she had, well then...” Her words died, and her eyelids grew so heavy. The empty glass fell from her hand.

Like a feather, she floated into her bed, carried in Chester’s arms. The satin felt so cool and smooth and good against her cheek. She snuggled in and soon fell into a deep dark hole.

Pain towed her to consciousness. Her legs ached, and it seemed as though a thousand of those desert humpedback beasts had run through her mouth. She rolled out of bed.

Why was she still in her dress? She shucked the thing then stumbled to the water closet.

Slowly that morning, the coffee overcame the rum’s lingering effects. Why had she drunk so much? She hated hard liquor. Truth be known, she didn’t care much for wine either, though it helped her find sleep on those troublesome nights.

And all that horrible man’s fault! Three days of passion, indeed.

Like she would ever trade her virtue for three meaningless days with him.

Chester let himself in, carrying a tray with more coffee, an assortment of little sweet cakes, and a crystal tumbler half-filled with a reddish brown liquid.

“What’s in the glass?”

He set the tray down and took the seat across from her. “Drink the concoction; the cook claims it cures what ails you.”

“You sample it?”

“Isn’t too bad, a bit spicy for my taste.”

Thick and creamy with a nice kick, the liquid burned some on the way down. She loved the tomato base, but for the life of her, could not discern anything else specifically.

For a bit after she’d drained the glass, nothing happened, but soon enough, the last of the lingering hammer hiding behind her eyes vanished.

She smiled. “Cook was correct. What was it?”

“Don’t know, he refused to give it up, said it’s a secret.”

She shrugged then chose one of the little muffins. “Chester, how soon before we dock?”

“Not long. Why, ma’am?”

“I don’t want to spend even one night in New Orleans.”

“I will make the arrangements.”

She rubbed the back of her neck; it too felt better. “Did you bring extra ink?”

“Yes, ma’am. I brought plenty of ink, paper, and enough quills for at least three more manuscripts after this one.”

“Good.” She pointed to her bedroom. “In my purse, get my winnings; I’ll not be needing them now.”

He did as told then returned to his seat. “Excellent, I was not looking forward to visiting The Swamp.”

“Well, I’ll admit I fancied to, but not now. I hate that man. And you’re right. I have no business stepping foot into the casinos.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Do you do that just to irritate me?”

“No, ma’am. I’m only trying to show you the respect you’re due.”

“Well, isn’t that a contradiction? I played the fool with yet another man, and you claim I’m due respect. That’s a good one, Chester. I’d laugh if I didn’t feel so much like crying.”

“My dear –”

“Don’t you dare die before me, or I’ll have no one. I’m doomed to pass from this world an old maid spinster; I certainly don’t want to be alone when it happens.”

“Turning Orr down wasn’t playing the fool.”

“But I wanted him to propose marriage. Even though he wasn’t the one. I knew that in my heart yet considered settling. Then he showed his true colors. I can’t believe the toady thought I would leave you here and go with him.”

He opened his mouth, but she held her hand up. “Please, don’t ma’am me one more time today.”

He smiled, stood, then backed toward the door. “If there’s nothing else, I’ll make the necessary arrangements.”

She hated being so close to the fortune she’d once lost in The Swamp, but she’d not risk seeing that man one more time. Anyway, she’d had her fill of gambling for the while.

All she wanted was to finish the manuscript and get the book and its characters out of her mind—clear the way for her Rangers’ story. Her pulse quickened. Buckmeyer might even know where Chester’s Pa lived.

She laughed at herself. Why had she called him that?

Once aboard the river boat, she holed up in her room, and fifteen thousand, two hundred and sixteen beautiful—though somewhat messier than usual—words stacked up on the pages. By the time the steamer pulled into Jefferson, she proudly penned The End.

Excellent. She was so proud of herself, too, not even one evening spent at the Riverboat’s tables. Chester had procured a wonderful suite, and she had slung ink. The chair wasn’t as nice as the one on the Georgia, but comfortable enough.

Once she reworked the first twenty-four chapters, she could have Chester post the manuscript. It should arrive well ahead of her deadline. Why had she fretted so? She’d never missed one yet.

Well, she did have to find a scribe; she never sent the only copy. Wouldn’t that be terrible? Having it lost somewhere between Texas and New York? She hadn’t thought there may not be any scribes in the whole of the wild west state.

Oh, if not, she could probably rewrite it, but what a distasteful task. She’d hate it.

After fifteen miserable hours of bumpy swaying on a stagecoach, she arrived in Clarksville, Texas, as ready—she was sure—as any traveler ever had been to exit the coach.



The dog raised his head, growled once, then bolted off the porch and headed north. Patrick Henry Buckmeyer hurried down the steps, counting children on his way.

Once all were sited, he looked north. A cloud of dust trailed east. He whistled, and New Blue trotted back to his side, then waited.

Soon a buggy, pulled by a matched set of grays, rounded the

corner and headed up his home hill. A young man he'd seen around town drove the team, a light-skinned colored man sat next to him, holding his fancy top hat.

The children who'd been playing in the yard joined the ones on the porch.

"Want me to get my gun, Uncle?"

He glanced at the ten-year-old. "We're fine, Charley."

The man reined in the team. "How do, Mr. Henry! How's things comin' out your way?"

"We're good. Who you got there?"

"Good morning, sir." The man touched his hat's brim. "Chester Meriwether. Seems I've found you, Colonel Buckmeyer. I'm also looking for Major Levi Baylor and Captain Wallace Rusk. Would you know their whereabouts?"

"Yes, sir, sure do. They're expected back any day now. Matter of fact, I was hoping the dust cloud you gentlemen raised might be them."

"May I be so presumptuous as to inquire where they've been, sir?"

Henry refrained from letting the smile out, blue around the mizen came to mind, but he didn't judge men by their skin color or the way they spoke. "Three weeks ago, they headed out for the Llano. Why are you asking, Chester?"

"Would you be so kind to spare me a few minutes of your time, sir?" He faced the driver. "Would you be available to wait a while?"

Henry shrugged, and the driver nodded. Why not?

"Come sit a spell." He threw a nod toward the back of his house and spoke to the young man. "Take your team to the barn and water and grain 'em if you're a mind. There's hay in the loft."

"Thank you, sir." He drove the buggy around the side of the house.

Chester took the seat next to Henry and extended his hand. "Good to meet you, sir. My father wrote of seeing a Patty Buckmeyer at Jonesboro; he knew him from the Battle of New Orleans. Are you that man?"

Henry smiled; no one had called him Patty in a coon's age. "So you must be Silas Meriwether's son."

"Yes, sir, and I've been looking for him. Might you happen to know my father's whereabouts?"

"No, sure don't. I ran into him a time or two after 1814, but haven't seen or heard of him in years. Sorry."

Disappointment etched the man's eyes, then he seemed to shrug it off. "Was he well the last time you saw him?"

"Same old Silas, strong as an ox. He'd taken up with a Cherokee squaw if memory serves."

The man sat back in Sue's rocker and sighed. "Inquiring about my father was a sidebar, so to speak. The real reason we came—my mistress and cousin, May Meriwether, wishes to interview Major Baylor and Captain Rusk.

"She's a novelist of some note and read of their exploits." He grinned. "Miss Meriwether has traveled to Texas, interested in fictionalizing some of their adventures. If they're agreeable."

The front door opened. Mary Rachel held out two glasses of water. "I'm sorry, sir, I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but did you say May Meriwether? She's here?"

"Yes, I did, Miss, and she's settling in as we speak at The Donoho."

"Oh, Daddy, you know how much I love her books. Tell him yes. I can't believe she's right here in Clarksville. How did that happen?"

Henry sat the water on the willow table between the rocking chairs; he couldn't remember the last time he'd seen his daughter so excited, especially not since her mother died.

"She is indeed. We've traveled to Texas all the way from New York."

"Oh, that's so exciting. Do you suppose I might meet her? Did you say you're her cousin? Could you ask her? When's her next book going to be out? Do you know what it's about?"

The visitor must have caught some of Mary Rachel's excitement and smiled at his second oldest daughter. "Yes, three times, Miss, then an I'm-not-sure and a no. She loves meeting her readers."

"Oh, that's wonderful!"

"Miss Meriwether finished the rough draft on her latest manuscript during the journey here, and is at this very moment reworking the first twenty-four chapters."

"Really? I cannot believe that May Meriwether is in Clarksville." She faced Henry. "Daddy, can we go? I have to meet her. Tell me we can. Come on, please. We've got to. Besides, just you and I haven't been to town since forever."

He wanted to say no, but knew better. In all of Mary Rachel's seventeen years, he'd never been able to deny her anything, just like her mother, God rest Sue's soul.

"If Mister Meriwether thinks Miss May would be agreeable, and Miss Laura is willing to watch your sisters and brother, I guess I could take my favorite daughter to the Donoho for supper."

"Oh, Daddy, thank you!" She threw her arms around his neck. "You're so wonderful." She glanced at the visitor. "He tells every one of us that we're his favorite."

He smiled, loving it that she knew him so well. "But it's true."

Chapter



Five

May stepped back; she couldn't see her new outfit completely in the mirror over the dresser. She backed up next to the bed, still not far enough. She faced Chester. "What do you think?"

"That Miss Mary Rachel will be thrilled, no matter what you're wearing."

She snarled. Why had he arranged this supper date, especially when she had no way to cancel?

The least he could have done was put them off a night, given her an opportunity to shop, or even have something made, but no. He assured the Buckmeyers that she would love to have supper with them tonight.

Indeed.

After a hundred miles on that awful stage, then editing until her eyes blurred, she only wanted to relax and enjoy the Donoho's overstuffed feather mattress.

"What time is it?"

He pulled out his gold timepiece and made a big show of flipping it open. "Six forty-eight, ma'am."

"Hold up that other dress."

He ignored her request. "You look fine as you are, ma'am, and I told them seven. Shall we go downstairs now, or shall you be late?"

She fluffed her curls then smoothed her dress. "Are you certain? I can still change. Being a few minutes late is acceptable, even fashionable."

"Not in Texas, ma'am."

"Fine, I'm ready then."

She followed Chester down the hall through the lobby then stopped at the double door that opened into the dining hall. He headed straight to a far corner table, where several standing men blocked her view.

Halfway across the room, a young lady burst from the confab and rushed toward her.

She stopped short of knocking her to the floor then stuck out both

hands. "Oh, Miss Meriwether, is it really you? I love your books."

May took the girl's hands. "Yes, it's me, and thank you. I'm thrilled that you love my stories."

"Oh, yes, Daddy –" The girl pulled back. "Where in the world have my manners gone? I apologize." She curtsied. "Mary Rachel Buckmeyer, ma'am." She looked over her shoulder.

"That's my father, the one sitting down, Patrick Henry, but he prefers Henry. Most folks call him Mister Henry. Some, mostly if they fought in the war, call him Colonel, but –" She put her hands to her mouth.

"I know I'm prattling on, and I'm so sorry for that. Just look at those rude men. They're taking all Daddy's attention." She took May by the hand. "Won't you come with me? I'll introduce you."

May let the girl pull her toward the group of men. As she neared, the one on the far side of the table rose and turned his full consideration to her. Time slowed. The child's father extended his hand.

Somehow, May extended hers, and he took it into his. A tingling spread up her arm all the way to the center of her chest and settled in the core of her being. Her heart flipped, beat too fast, and then stopped.

A little gasp escaped.

She smiled more at herself than him. She must stop being an idiot immediately. The man was married.

"Miss May, I'd like you to meet my father, Patrick Henry Buckmeyer, but he prefers Henry."

"Henry." He hadn't released her hand. She gave a slight shake. "I'm so pleased to make your acquaintance."

"The pleasure is mine." The man pointed to a chair to his right. "Please." Turning to the men who pretty much all stared, he nodded. "I'm sure you'll excuse me, fellows. I have plans with the two ladies and don't intend to bore them with politics."

They dissipated, she sat, and Chester pushed her chair in then retreated. As though the waitress anticipated nothing more than for May to take her place, the lady began delivering plates laden with steak, creamed potatoes, and a pile of the greenest steaming greens May ever saw.

Henry nodded toward her. "Hope you like steak. I took the liberty of ordering."

She smiled at the liquid velvet emitting from his mouth then chided her ears. They loved the sound of his voice too much. Why, she was doomed, relegated to spinsterhood!

All the attractive men who caused such a reaction inside her had been snatched up and married. "Thank you, sir. It smells wonderful,

and I've never seen greener greens."

He extended his hand toward Mary Rachel, who took it then held his other out to her as did the young lady. May looked from one hand to the other. What were they doing?

They obviously wanted to hold her hands. Perhaps a Texian tradition. She placed hers into their open palms, then the girl and her father bowed their heads.

How quaint. He was going to bless the food right there in public. She had landed in the middle of a gathering of religious zealots? She resisted the urge to look around for Chester.

The cad probably was grinning from ear to ear.

Praying at a restaurant. Indeed.

"Amen." Henry released her hand and went to work on his side of beef.

May allowed herself three extra bites of the best tasting filet mignon she'd ever eaten in her life. It literally melted in her mouth.

And as for the greens, she'd never cared for the vegetable, be they turnip, collard, or mustard. Started not to even try them, but the pigment was so intense, she forked one small bite.

Beyond belief, they tasted delicious. And the roll. Everything about the meal, exceptional!

These Texians had to be serious about their eating. Hardly a word passed until their plates lay emptied. "Would you care for dessert, ma'am?"

His daughter smiled. "The Donoho's known for their wonderful assortment of pies."

"Well, if it's anything like the meal, I'm certain it would be scrumptious, but I couldn't eat another bite. I don't know when I've enjoyed a meal more."

Once the waitress cleared the table, Henry turned to her. "I want to thank you, ma'am."

He was as bad as Chester ma'aming her. She tilted her head ever so slightly, and shamelessly stared into his eyes. "Whatever for, Henry?"

"Writing books that my daughters can read."

"Oh, why, thank you." She found no lust in the windows of the man's soul, but something else tugged at her heart. Though not quite sure of what she saw, she didn't think it had anything to do with her.

Was he so in love with his wife that all other women paled in comparison? And why hadn't she accompanied him? Had May ever known such a devoted man?

"Daughters you say? You have another?"

Mary Rachel touched her arm. "Yes, ma'am. I have four sisters and one little scalawag brother."

“Oh, Mary Rachel, Houston isn’t a scalawag.”

The girl gave her father a stern look as though she the parent and he the unruly child. May loved it. A doting father and his patronizing daughter. Reminded her a bit of her and the commodore before....

She’d certainly have to work those two into a book.

“Daddy! You proclaim to be a guardian of the truth. You know you don’t switch him near enough.”

He nodded, and gave her a let’s-not-get-this-old-debate-going look, before facing May. “A few years back, Mary Rachel wanted something different to read. I asked around, and your name kept coming up, so _”

“I’ve read all your books. Every single one. At least twice, some even three times.”

The young lady’s enthusiasm tickled May. “Well, you have no idea how that delights me. Penning love stories is...well....” She shrugged. “To be honest, at times I get so bored.”

“How could you? It must be so much fun.”

“Yes, most of the time, but this last one presented a real struggle for the first half or better. Then after that, the characters took over their own tale. That’s when the story caught a strength. A good portion of what I’d written needed reworking.”

She looked to Henry. “There’s nothing more tedious than rewrites. Hopefully, I can finish it in a day or two. I’m nearing my deadline.”

“Really? Who gave you a deadline?”



Henry enjoyed how the novelist mesmerized his daughter with her explanation of publishing. He’d known the basics of getting the written word into print, but found the details interesting as well. No wonder the ladies love reading May’s books. If her stories proved half as interesting as listening to her, then they would be grand.

He glanced toward the next table. Chester sipped coffee and pretended not to be watching. May’s cousin, but he called her his mistress first; was he her slave?

Henry hated the thought of any person being owned by someone else, but understood it.

The Bible even spoke of how a slave and master should act, as though the practice wasn’t frowned upon by the Almighty. But he also hated the way so many slave owners took advantage of what they considered their property.

If up to him, he’d free them all, but for sure anyone with mixed blood would be counted white, not the other way around.

Was that how Chester came to be May’s cousin?

"I could do that. Tell her daddy."

Henry focused on his baby girl. "What darling? Tell who what?"

"Miss May. Tell her how legible my penmanship is."

How had that come up? "Yes, ma'am. She writes the final draft of all my letters. Her mother taught her well."

"So then can I? I'll do it for free, too. My pay will be getting to read your next book before everyone else." She beamed. "I'm so excited."

The evening had been so good for Mary Rachel. He loved her being so animated, then looked from his baby to the lady. "What exactly are we talking about?"

"Oh, I was telling Mary Rachel how once I finish reworking my novel, I'll need a scribe. I never post the only copy."

"Sure, if she wants to, I don't care. The cotton isn't ready, and the canning's all but finished. She has chores, but they don't take too long of a morning."

"Wonderful, then it's settled. I'll have Chester fetch you as soon as I'm finished with my revisions."

Henry held his hands up. "Whoa now. I'm sorry, ma'am, but my daughter won't be going with Chester or anyone else. He can bring your book to her, but she stays with me."

"Oh, I'm sorry." She was obviously taken aback; maybe he shouldn't have been so blunt. "I, uh.... Suffice it to say, as like you with your daughter, I never let a new manuscript out of my sight until it's in print. I've so much invested. You understand."

"Oh, Daddy." She faced the author. "He's only worried about Indians snatching me. It's ridiculous." She turned back to him. "I'm seventeen years old. I could stay a few days in town."

"No, Mary Rachel, you cannot." He hated using the tone he reserved for insubordinate men on his baby, but he couldn't stand the thought of her being in any danger.

"Indians?" She glanced around at her man. "Are they still a threat? I was under the assumption --"

"But Daddy." Her bottom lip quivered.

"No, don't Daddy me." He faced the lady. "My home is plenty big. You and Chester are welcome to come stay with us." He smiled. "Your cousin said you came to visit with Levi and Wallace. They should be back any day now."

"Oh do! Please, Miss May, say yes. You can have my room. It's the best, on the corner. There's almost always a breeze. I'll bunk with Gwendolyn, or CeCe."

"I do understand the need of a breeze." She smiled and her eyes sparkled. "Your Texas sun is blistering."

Mary Rachel touched her lips. "Oh, I don't care where I sleep. I'd

bunk with Houston if it meant you'd come!"

Couldn't help but chuckle. He leaned back in this chair. "Now, Miss Meriwether, that is quite a sacrifice."

"Please say you'll come. There's plenty of room just like Daddy said. I'd love it so much!"



May shook her head. How could anyone deny this young lady anything? She faced the girl's father. "Are you positive we wouldn't be a burden? I don't want to put anyone out."

"No, not at all. We have plenty of room." He chuckled. "Please do, or I'll not hear the end of how mean I am for not letting my baby stay in town by herself."

"Oh, Daddy, I am not a baby."

May patted the girl's arm. "Sweetheart, get used to it. You'll always be his baby until the day he dies."

The young lady put her hand over May's. "Will you then? Say you will."

May looked from the girl to her father; it would be wonderful to get to know the man better, if only for her next book's sake. She'd never come between a husband and his wife.

But if she'd judged him right, that wouldn't be possible anyway. "And what about your Mis'ess? What will she think of you inviting two strangers to stay in her home?"

He shook his head.

"Mama's with the Lord; she passed almost six years ago when Houston—my baby brother—was born."

"Oh, dear." Without even thinking, her hand rested on top of Henry's. "I'm so sorry."

He nodded. "Thank you, ma'am, so you'll come?"

"Alright then, fine. Once I've finished with the revisions, we'll come." She faced the man. "If you're sure it's no problem."

"None at all. But why wait? Do your rewrite there. I promise you'll like Mammy's cooking better than the Donoho's."

His words pushed her back. Could any chef beat the meal she'd just enjoyed?

"Oh, no, that might be dangerous to my waistline. I've never eaten a more enjoyable supper. Fine, it's settled then. We'll check out first thing in the morning and hire a carriage."

"That won't be necessary. I'll send Jean Paul to pick you up."

That night as she waited for sleep to find her, May tried to picture Mis'ess Patrick Henry Buckmeyer, but couldn't decide exactly what kind of lady Mary Rachel's father would marry.

A bit of the man showed in his daughter, though not much. Perhaps the girl favored her mother. The young lady certainly was a beauty.

Her looks could have been from someone else, maybe Henry's mother? What did it matter anyway? Not a whit. She shouldn't be speculating on what his deceased wife looked like.

Even if Mis'ess Buckmeyer had been a homely old hag—not that a man like Henry would be attracted to an ugly woman—May had no business thinking such thoughts.

But six years, and he hadn't remarried?

She took a deep breath and held it. Maybe he could find love again. Maybe... Stop it, goodness gracious, she and he were from different worlds. He was obviously very religious.

What would he think about her unbelief? Would he still open his home and allow his daughter to spend time with her if he knew?

She shouldn't even think about him. He wouldn't be interested in an old spinster. Why, he only agreed to the supper because of his delightful daughter. She smiled.

How lucky to find someone so anxious to pen a copy of her novel.

Chapter



Six

The morning crawled along extra slow and hot; the children finished their chores, and Laura had them busy cracking the books. Right after sunup, he and the dog had taken their usual turn around the section that surrounded the big house.

Found no tracks or scents to be concerned with; looked like a new sounder of hogs rooted some on the other side of Langford Creek, but he'd leave them to the others. Henry liked running the wild ones to ground well enough, but not this day.

Back at the house, he leaned his rifle against the cedar post then settled into his porch rocker and waited. For the third time that morning, he resisted the urge to visit Sue's grave.

For sure, she'd understand. Her special place in his heart would be there until the day he passed over, but the rip had healed and scarred over. She'd understand; maybe even encourage him.

Of late, he'd been considering all the widows he knew in the Red River Valley. Each in their own way encouraged him to come courting, but didn't seem that a one of them was worth the effort.

Instead, the most interesting lady he'd met in years traveled all the way from New York City and was due to arrive and stay right here at his home as his houseguest. Like the Lord arranged it all.

Thinking on the scuttlebutt the gossips would hurl if they knew of the arrangements he'd made gave him a smile. Wonder if any of them had seen her yet? They'd for sure have heard she was in town. The gossip in Clarksville got around fast as a change of weather in Texas.

Leaning forward, he checked to the north, but nothing. No dust cloud, not a hint of anyone coming. Not even a stray bird. He rocked back and contemplated the lady.

She oozed strength.

He loved the way she fussed with her wayward curls. Her nose, in itself, might be considered a bit wide, but it worked so well on her face. Matched her lips.

Never had he encountered a mouth that begged to be kissed before, but May Meriwether sported one.

Stop being a fool. He closed his eyes. What an idiot. She didn't come looking for love, might even have one back east—probably did. Wouldn't be a reason any man in his right mind wouldn't want her.

No, she came to Texas for some onsite research for her new novel, not a husband.

How old was she? Maybe thirty-five, not a lot older than Rebecca.

Wouldn't do for him to be robbing the cradle. A laugh escaped. If he were to marry a gal young enough to be his daughter, that would silence all the glad-handers who wanted him to stand for office.

For sure, he'd throw his hat in if he could be dictator, but making deals with all the devils didn't seem to him like the way to run a state.

Governor Buckmeyer or Senator did have a certain ring, but could he pay the price those titles would cost him? Other than Jackson and Houston, had he ever even known an office holder not corrupt—above mayor anyway.

The dog raised his head then growled. Henry stood. "It's alright, boy." He stepped off the porch with New Blue out in front. Above the tree line to the north, a small dust cloud rose. Wouldn't be long now.

He retreated to his rocker. Shouldn't seem too eager. Surprised him a bit though that his heart beat faster.

For sure, he didn't want to act like some old chowderhead around the young woman. He smiled at himself. Was that what he was doing? Playing to the fool?

Thinking this handsome, successful lady might possibly have any interest in the likes of him?



May poofed a wayward curl interfering with her peripheral vision. "My, my, aren't these Texas pine trees so big and tall? They're beautiful. I love it how the branches grow over the road, and the shade is divine. Are we almost there?"

Chester looked out the carriage's window. "Yes, ma'am. We've been on the man's land for a while now."

"Oh, look! There's a deer. Did you see it? It ran right across the road."

He smiled. "All I caught was a big white tail disappearing into the woods." The driver turned back west. "Good, the house isn't far past these fields Mr. Buckmeyer's getting ready for wheat."

She couldn't believe it. She faced Chester. "Did you see?"

"Yes, ma'am. I saw."

She looked again at the gang of slaves working the man's fields. "Tell him, tell the driver to turn this carriage right around and take us right back to town. I'll not be staying in any house where a man

thinks it's perfectly fine to own another man."

"We've come a long way, May. Turning around now doesn't make sense."

So logical all the time, she hated his logic. She would certainly not spend one night in the man's house. Her insides warmed.

Seething, she gritted her teeth and looked at the window, watching the slaves in the field. Purposely, she took deep breaths then blew them out slow, through her nose, a little surprised flames didn't singe her nostrils.

How unfortunate for young Mary Rachel, born and raised to believe owning another person was no more than owning horses or cattle. To be taught that the poor darkies need a master.

Someone to care for them, or what? Why should their hard labor be considered a fair exchange for food and a roof over their underprivileged nappy heads?

She swallowed the venom, but not too deep. She fully intended to bite the hand that fed these deprived folks, an absolute certainty. And it wouldn't be a little love nip, either.

If the man gave her half a chance, she'd rip out his jugular and feed it to his dogs. She couldn't believe Chester hadn't said anything to her. He'd been there. He'd seen what went on.

"Why didn't you warn me? You definitely should have before I ever accepted the man's invitation."

"My initial visit, I only met our driver Jean Paul and his mother, the cook. They are not Buckmeyer's slaves, but freed coloreds in his employ."

"Oh? So what if he pays his house boy and cook. Just look there in the fields at those poor men!"

He leaned closer to the window. "Yes, ma'am, but look again. They work alone. Do you see a mounted overseer? Or even a dog to chase after if they were to run."

She gazed out the window and swallowed her pride a bit. Jumping to conclusions got her in more trouble than she cared to recall. "Well." She softened her tone. "No. I do not."

Guess Buckmeyer deserved at least the opportunity to explain himself. She might retract her claws, but she'd keep them close and sharp.

Chester settled back into his seat. "It's feasible they're all freed men gainfully employed."

"I suppose that's a possibility." She, too, pushed back into the padded seat. She'd give him a chance, but the first thing, she'd discover the status of Buckmeyer's field hands.

Henry hadn't struck her as a slave master, but the only one of those she'd really known had fooled her. In her own defense, she'd

been a child, and him, her father.

The carriage rounded a corner, and she caught a glimpse of the house. She resisted the urge to lean out and study the massive two-story structure. Such a grand and beautiful home.

Who would have imagined? And out in the sticks. Why, just hauling everything so far must have cost a fortune. Chester had called it nice but offered no details.

Guess she'd pictured some oversized log structure sprawling out over the blistering prairie with nary a tree in sight, but they stood tall in most every direction.

In her mind's eye, it sat baking in the Texas sun, but in reality, looked like such a haven painted a cool shade of green with the huge oak in front and enormous pine in back. And even a turret, simply charming.

She chuckled to herself.

Her original idea had thrown in the cabin being draped with sleeping hunting hounds with a mess of dirty little urchins running amuck.

The carriage came to a stop. She covered her mouth while the dust settled, then scooted forward. The door opened, and Buckmeyer himself stood there, like he'd been waiting for her.

He extended his hand. "Good morning, Miss Meriwether. Welcome to our home."

She took it and let him help her out then gave him the coldest smile she owned. "Thank you, but there's something I need to know straightaway."

He stepped back a bit, but kept hold of her hand. "What would that be?"

She bore into his eyes, daring him to look away. "Those men, the ones working your fields, are they your slaves?"

His lips spread into a broad grin. "Are all Yankees this forward?"

"Well, uh, I live in New York, but I'm certainly not a Yankee and wouldn't know. I was born in Virginia, and prefer to think of myself as a Southern lady. So? Are those men your slaves or not?"

"No, ma'am." Buckmeyer nodded toward the carriage driver. "Most of them are Jean Paul's relatives. I admit to buying a few of them over the years, but only so we could bring them here and emancipate them."

He shook his head again. "If you must know, Jean Paul and I have not even indentured them. They're free to come and go as they please."

"I see. I'm very relieved to hear that."

"Two of his cousins got gold fever when news of Sutter's Mill reached us; they left this spring." He shrugged. "I hate slavery, and

other than those aforementioned times, have never owned another man.”

The joy in her heart spread to her mouth. “Please forgive me for my misjudgment, sir. Ownership of a human being is absolutely deplorable in my humble opinion.”

“No offense taken. We’re in agreement, ma’am.” He turned toward the house. “Come meet the children. They’ll love the interruption.”

The oversized, double twelve paned front doors impressed her to the hilt with their cut glass. Simply exquisite.

He led her inside to a grand entry hall, not quite as grand as Sea Side, but how had he built this house in the middle of nowhere without slave labor?

“Your home is beautiful, Mr. Buckmeyer.”

He beamed. “Call me Henry.”

“Henry, then.” Movement diverted her attention away from scrutinizing the extra wide staircase to her left.

“Miss May! You came. You’re really here.” Behind Mary Rachel, a string of well scrubbed children filled out of a room that connected to the dining room to her right.

“Yes, I’m really here.” May did her best to imprint all the names to the lovely little faces, but she was getting lost when Henry started explaining the relationships.

She got it that Lacy, the dark-haired little beauty belonged to the lady who came in with the children, but she’d for sure need to take notes to keep this crew straight.

Where had Chester gone? He was better with names and relationships.

Mary Rachel asked a question, then before May could answer, the next oldest daughter—Gwendolyn, if she had it right—asked one of her own. Then the biggest boy Charley, stepped forward and added his voice to the sudden melee.

“Enough, silence. Where have your manners gone?” Henry stepped between her and the children. “Get back to your studies. You can talk with Miss May at dinner—one at a time. Now git.”

Like good soldiers marching off to war, Henry’s children obeyed his order. She loved it. These little ones acted exactly like hers would, if the right man would only come along and do his duty.

After the last one disappeared into the room off the dining hall, she turned toward the man. “You run a tight ship. My compliments. Your offspring are lovely.”

He leaned in close. “I got my bluff in on them early, and bless the Lord, I haven’t had to use the switch on the little darlings much at all.”

She smiled. What was it with this man? Usually, the men she’d

been around only cursed in God's name, not blessed Him. "Well, they certainly are well behaved."

"Thank you. Care for water or a little something to eat? Dinner's still another hour or so."

"No, no. I'm fine, but if perhaps I could see my room, I'd like to get organized for Mary Rachel to start this afternoon." She looked around. "Where did Chester get off to?"

"He stayed with Jean Paul. I suspect they have already carried your things upstairs."

"How's that possible? I would have seen."

"We have two other sets of stairs." He looked toward the one right beside the front double doors and extended his bent arm. "Mary Rachel has your room all ready."

She laid her hand over his forearm and let him lead her upstairs, pleased as punch over her decision to accept his offer—and to make the trip, a grand adventure, indeed.

"I'd envisioned Texas as being wide open, only a few trees, and more desert-like, yet all I've seen completely dispels my previous impressions."

"Yes, ma'am, it's a big state. Why, you've barely scratched its surface."



Henry stopped at the side of the door and let her waltz on in. She took three steps then twirled around slowly soaking in the room, then glanced back to him. "Ten foot ceilings?"

"Helps with the heat."

"I love your home. Truly. It's beautiful, or did I already say that? Are all the rooms this charming?"

"Size wise, this is the second largest, next to mine, but yes, I promised Sue's father I'd build her a home as grand as the one she grew up in."

"Your wife was obviously a very lucky woman."

He smiled. "Well, we don't believe in luck. All good things come from the Lord. We give Him the glory instead of luck. Shame you can't get to know her." He looked off, resisting again the urge to go have a visit with her. "I'm certain you two would've been great friends."

"Why, thank you, Henry. What a nice thing for you to say. I do wish I could have had that opportunity."

He smiled at this most intriguing lady then eased the door closed. Well, if his Sue was still alive, he would never have invited Miss May Meriwether home. No. His wife would have skinned him and the novelist both if she'd have known what was in his heart.

Chapter



Seven

Exactly like the man figured. All of May's things were unpacked, and her manuscript sat on the writing table that looked out of place. She smiled. An extra chair had definitely just been brought into the room.

It didn't match anything, but looked very comfortable. She tried it out, seemed a bit big. She wiggled, but oh so perfect.

Was it Henry's personal chair? She liked the thought of being in it, if it was. How long since he'd sat there? Oh, goodness gracious. She had to stop.

Henry's rugged charm certainly attracted her, and she had no complaints about his manners, but the religious fanatic would never be interested in an agnostic woman.

Especially one who had no need for any man. Well, except for making babies. She couldn't do that alone. But he already had so many. Between his five—if she'd counted right—and all the extras, his house could be called a zoo.

So even if he did like her—which he didn't—and she liked him, he'd never do for her any more than she'd do for him. Why, the man would have to be crazy to want another child.

And one thing was certain. If she ever gave her heart away to any male, it would only be to fulfill the longing in her soul for her own baby. The memory of her mother's deathbed conversation washed over her.

"You'll never know how very much I love you, Millicent, until you have a daughter of your own," she'd said.

Would May ever know?

More of that last conversation tried to replay in her head, but she didn't want to hear more. It broke her heart that day, the second worse day of her life. No twelve-year-old should lose their mother.

Besides, every other time she toyed with the memory, her heart broke all over again. No, she neatly folded her reminiscence and tucked it away as far into obscurity as possible.

Perspiration trickled down her temple. She patted it with her lace-

trimmed handkerchief. How could anyone get used to this horrible heat?

She hated remembering the day her mother died. What brought it on anyway? Oh, yes—babies—and Henry Buckmeyer. That look in his eye at the Donoho said it all.

That he still mourned. So lovesick over his dead wife, he wasn't interested in her or most likely, any other woman. Poor man. Must have been a blow to be widowed so young. In his early forties?

Moreover, not one time had she caught him gawking. Other than helping her out of the carriage, or offering his arm to go up the stairs, he'd not touched her, and then only being the perfect gentleman—nothing more than Chester would have done in the same situation.

She placed her feet back on the floor, leaned forward, straightened the stack of clean paper, then picked up the quill and tickled her chin with the feather to get her creative juices flowing.

Oh, the time he had prayed over supper last night. He'd held her hand then, too. But that didn't really count, and he didn't hang on too long or give her a little squeeze or anything that might imply an interest.

He'd made no advances; unquestionably not in the market for an old maid ink slinger.

She put all thoughts of Patrick Henry Buckmeyer from her mind and found her place in the story. After only ten pages, a knock interrupted her rewrite.

“Yes?”

The door opened, and Mary Rachel's head appeared. “Daddy says you have time to wash up before dinner. I filled your pitcher this morning. It's there on the bureau in its bowl.”

May capped the ink well, set her quill down, then examined her hands. As customary, she'd not gotten a speck of ink on her anywhere. She hated getting dirty, stained with the offending liquid even worse.

But if he wanted her to wash.... “Thank you, dear. I'll be right down.”

She resisted the urge to change dresses or tidy her unruly curls or even daub on more perfume. No need for any of that, she had no one to impress.

Plain and simple, he'd invited her only to indulge his favorite daughter. She grinned. That was so funny, him calling each one his favorite. She'd use that in one of her novels to be sure.

Maybe she'd write about a widower—with a passel of children—looking for love out in the wild west. Henry himself would make an excellent model for her next hero.

Unlike all the perfectly handsome mannequin men who played hard to get in her other books.

Or was he?

May practically skipped down the stairs and found all the men sitting at the table. The girls carried in a beautiful soup tureen, a platter of sandwiches, another of sliced vegetables, and drinks for each place.

She did miss New York's ice. It would be especially nice out here in the core of this volcano known as Texas.

In mere minutes, the Buckmeyer fellows all stood, and the little ladies took their chairs one by one in obvious order of age. Mary Rachel sat on her father's left.

The chair on his right remained empty. He offered it to her with a sweep of his hand and a smile. She took the seat between him and Chester, and all the males sat after she did.

All hands came out, palms up. Oh, yes. No doubt time to pray. She laid her left in Henry's and reached across Chester to take Mammy's, but he grabbed it and wrapped his left hand around the colored woman's as though he did such every day.

"Houston, I believe it's your turn to say grace. And don't be long-winded." Henry gave her a little squeeze. She glanced at him, and he smiled.

Thankful everyone bowed their head, she did likewise, knowing full well she had blushed, by the warmth in her cheeks. A little wave of flutters rolled in her tummy.

"God is good. God is great. Thank you for this little bit of grub. And please give us meat and taters for supper. Amen." The boy looked straight to his father who pursed his lips and gave his boy a half nod.

"Thank you, Son."

The soup, a vegetable medley in a delicious chicken stock, hit the spot. The sandwich tray came by, with wholes, halves, and quarters. She chose a half with ham.

From the second tray, she took a leaf of lettuce and two slices of the reddest tomatoes she'd seen since she was a little girl. She'd enjoy a thin sliver of the purple onion, but....

"Henry, you lied to me."

The man eyed her hard. "How's that?"

"You told me Mammy was good in the kitchen, not that she was a master chef you had stolen away from Queen Victoria's court."

The cook leaned out past Chester. Her lips spread into the biggest grin. "Oh, Miss May, now you're the one fibbing, not my Mister Henry."

"Truth be told, I've never eaten at the Queen's table except in my stories, but the cuisine couldn't be any better. This soup is divine, and that's a fact."

"I agree. Mammy can cook rings around all of 'em. We're all

blessed to have her.”

Blessed, not lucky? An odd way to put it. May took another sip then forced her hand to lay down the spoon. If she didn’t watch it, she’d weigh a ton before she headed back east.

But exactly when she would do that posed another question.

If Chester agreed, she might just go on to California, try her hand at prospecting for gold. That would certainly be an adventure she could write about; a poor gold miner striking it rich and having all the ladies wanting to be his wife.

She faced Henry. “You ever get the bug to go find a mountain of gold?”

He laughed. “No, I have plenty enough of what I need. I like it right here.”

“Uncle Henry.”

The man looked to the middle of the table, where the oldest boy sat. “What is it, Charley?”

“Can me and my boys go with Jean Paul and the others in the morning?”

Mary Rachel leaned out. “My boys and I, Charley. Say it right, or I’ll tell the Major, and he’ll tan your hide.”

The young lady who sat beside Jean Paul shook her finger at the little towhead—Laura, if May rightly remembered. “And probably mine, too. Try hard to remember and use proper English so you don’t get me in trouble, too.”

The boy said several words in a language May had never heard then smiled a very hollow grin at Mary Rachel. He faced the man.

“Uncle Henry, can my boys and I go with them in the morning?”

“Exactly where are you and the boys wanting to go?”

Houston jumped to his feet. “Running that sounder of hogs, Pa. ‘Bout high time we had some fun around here. Chores and schooling’s all we ever do.”

“We’ll have to see about that. Now that I know what’s afoot, you boys settle down and finish your dinner, and let me think on this a while.”

For the next few minutes nothing but spoons clinging the china bowls sounded. It duly impressed May how Henry had done so long without a wife, and so well.

Not that she would ever experience the joy of rearing a child. She wanted a baby alright, but not someone else’s.

“What about you, Bart? You wanting to go, too?”

The dark-haired boy sitting on the other side of Houston nodded. “Yes, sir. I want to shoot a bid old hod and tut his belly and pull his duts out, and –”

“Whoa, Bartholomew. That’s not proper talk for the dinner table.”

The second oldest girl faced her palm toward the boy.

The man guffawed and glanced at May.

She covered her mouth with her napkin and did her best not to gag or regurgitate.

Barely able to talk for laughing, he touched her hand. "I apologize, ma'am. You'll have to forgive Bart. He gets excited."

She placed the napkin back on the table and nodded with what she hoped was enough of a smile to get by. "Of course." Gracious. The child couldn't be more than five, and he had a gun?

And his uncle was thinking about letting him go to the woods and shoot a wild hog? Texians. Would anyone believe it without seeing for themselves?

Henry regained his composure. "Shooter sound? You boys been seeing to his hooves? Keeping him brushed out?"

Charley nodded. "Yes, sir. You know how the Major is. He don't cotton to slackers, especially when it comes to horse flesh."

Laura beat Mary Rachel to the correction. "Charley, he doesn't. 'Don't' isn't correct."

"Sorry, ma'am."

"Bart, you good doubling with your brother?"

Disappointment flashed across the boy's face then he hid it. "Yes, sir, but I'm a tough wanger. Tan I tarry my long wif?"

"No, we best rope them."

Houston jumped to his feet. "Oh, Pa, you're taking all the fun out of it." The boy punched the air. "We want to shoot 'em dead. We hate them nasty rooters."

"Sit."

"Don't know why we can't shoot 'em. Buzzards need to eat, too."

"And you, young man, will be riding with me." The man's tone silenced the boy.

All three returned to their midday repast. Charley, Houston, and Bart—she had them down. Levi's, Henry's, and Levi's.

Shortly, Henry and all the other males, even Chester, rose and began clearing the table. What was with the man? Out of his own mouth, he claimed to have everything he needed, yet he helped clear the table while the girls sat and visited.

And who had clued Chester into the arrangement? And what was with him holding Mammy's hand? May hated that name. So many colored women had that moniker hung around their necks. Why, it was almost as bad as calling one of the colored men Boy.

"Miss May, would you care for some coffee or tea, before we get started?"

May looked across the table at the seventeen-year-old. "Thank you, but no. We can get right to work, unless you have something else

you need to do.”

The girl stood. “I’m all yours.”

Following an initial flurry of questions and instructions, Mary Rachel worked in silence. May returned to the rewrite, thankful the girl wasn’t a chatter box.

After what must have been two hours, she capped her ink well and studied on Henry’s baby girl. Could a mother ask more than for her daughter to turn out just like Mary Rachel?

The girl looked up. “What? Am I doing something wrong?”

“No, no. I was only thinking what a wonderful young lady you were. Your mother must have been so proud of you.”

Mary Rachel sniffed then her lips turned down, like she was trying to keep from crying. “I hope so. It’s so strange. It’s been six years, and I still miss her every day something terrible.”

May held out her arms. “Oh, sweetheart.”

She scooted out of her chair and fell on May’s neck. For the longest the distraught girl let herself be hugged then pushed back. “Forgive me, ma’am. Having you here. Well, no one has sat in mother’s chair until today.”

“Oh, no. I shouldn’t have been the one. Why in the world did –”

“No, Daddy told us he wanted you to have it. He bought it special for her because she sat in it and said she’d never been in a more comfortable chair. He didn’t get it right then, he waited and surprised her with it on the anniversary of when she came and asked him to help her get her cotton to market.”

The girl wiped her cheeks and stood. She walked to the window and looked out. “That’s when they fell in love, on that trip down the Jefferson Trace. I think it’s wonderful you sitting in her place.”

Mary Rachel turned back and faced her. “You have no idea the difference in him since you came. No one’s sat in her chair at the table, either.”

What a romantic the man was. Could Henry be interested in her after all? She turned back. “He’s never let anyone sit in her place at the table either, has he?”

“No, ma’am. Rebecca’s always on his left when she’s here, with the Major next to her, then me. Mammy’s where Chester was.” Mary Rachel smiled. “He’s funny about some things, like sitting according to age.”

Well now, this changed everything.

Or did it?

The young lady returned to the table, and picked up her quill, but then twisted back toward May. “Would a personal question be out of order, ma’am?”

She smiled. “Depends on how personal.”

"Is it too personal to ask if you've ever been married?"

"No, and no."

"Engaged?"

May grinned. Was the child or father asking? "Afraid not. I've never even been asked."

"Really? That is so hard to believe."

"No, you just don't know me very well yet. I'm fully aware of how difficult I can be; if not for my Chester, I'm certain I'd have no one at all."

The girl's brows arched higher, and she gave a little understanding nod. "My mama? God rest her soul. Now she was plenty hard to get along with at times. Don't get me wrong. She was absolutely wonderful."

"I'm sure."

"She loved with a passion, and treasured her relationship with the Lord. Enjoyed having fun with us so much, but Mama had a temper on her and had to have everything so perfect. No one could ever do anything good enough in her estimation, except for Daddy." She grinned. "Sometimes not him either." She shook her head. "You just haven't met the right man, that's all."

May resisted the urge to say more. Instead, she shrugged. "That's possible, I suppose, but I'm pretty used to doing exactly what I want whenever I want to do it. Might be too set in my ways to have a man in my life. Besides, who'd want an old maid ink slinger?"

"Oh, Miss May, you're a beautiful woman."

She smiled. "Well, thank you, sweet girl. Guess we best both get back to work. Chester's liable to show any minute wanting to see some progress."

The girl nodded then beamed. "And by the way, I'm loving this book. I read the whole page before I go back and copy it and can hardly wait to get to the next, but I'm taking my time."

"I'm glad you like it."

"Yes, ma'am. I'm being very careful of my penmanship. I can't imagine how much fun it will be to hold the real book in my hands! It's going to be my favorite of all the ones you've written so far."

The girl's enthusiasm was infectious, made May want to get this one done, so she could rest some before starting on the next.

And she had to agree, finally having her stories actually printed and bound thrilled her every time, but she resisted the urge to open that new jar of time-wasting.

"A toast?" She lifted her quill in the air toward the girl who lifted hers as well. "To romance, the language of love, and finishing this one, so we can have some fun while I'm here!"

Mary Rachel laughed pointing the quill toward May. "Here, here."



Henry rocked out, held his chair forward in place, then studied the pile for a bit. Satisfied, he settled back again. Charley wasn't being too rough with the younger ones.

He loved how the ten-year-old took care of his boys as he called them. Henry couldn't love Rose and Levi's son any more than if he'd fathered him. But then they were all his, even Laura's Little Lacy called him Pa.

Footfalls turned his head, but it was only Mammy bringing him a cup of tea. The old girl seemed to have an extra spring in her step of late.

"Here you go, Mister Henry, nice and hot, with a little dab of honey and cream."

He took the cup. "You spoil me something terrible."

"Yes, sir, that's my pleasure to do." She waltzed back inside. The Lord had blessed him so much when he sent Jean Paul and his family. Hopefully, traders could locate Mammy's brother; he'd love having the whole clan in Red River County.

Help us, Lord; let me do this little kindness for her.

He loved blessing people, making them smile. That's the only thing money was good for. He'd overpaid for the last two of her cousins he'd brought home.

Grinned to himself; good thing their owners didn't know he'd would've paid double the price. But what good was all the gold he and Levi had buried over the years if he couldn't spend some of it? Buy what he wanted?

Right now, what he wanted was upstairs; but she wasn't to be bought. He resisted the urge to look in on the novelist. He wanted to spend alone time with her, get to know her, and see if his first impressions proved true.

Oh, Lord, could it be that you brought her?

He hated sitting there with her being just up the stairs, but it probably didn't matter. For sure, she must have some fancy man waiting for her in New York.

He knew this. If she belonged to him, he would never stand for her traveling halfway across the country by herself. Forget Chester. Henry would go, or she wouldn't.

Chapter

Eight

Henry eased the book closed. Houston had finally given it up and dozed off. He'd lasted a good three pages longer than Bart and Lacey. Henry smiled, extracting himself from the huddle of little boys who had fallen asleep draped over him.

While the big girls got out their own books, Charley followed him to the kitchen.

"How come we got to rope those hogs, Uncle Henry?"

Dipping a scoop of water, he took a sip then held it for the boy. "Remember last year when we killed all the shoats and jakes and put 'em in the smoke house?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you recall when we did that?"

"Not exactly, but I remember the morning being real cold."

"That's right. You always wait to butcher a hog until the first freeze. Gives you plenty of time to get 'em in the smokehouse. For sure wouldn't do to waste any good meat."

"Yes, sir. Is that why Jean Paul and the cousins been building that new hog waller?"

He nodded at the boy. "You don't miss much, son."

"Yes, sir. Well, suppose I can go help 'em? For sure don't want anything holding us up in the morning."

"How many books did the Major want you to read before he got back?"

The boy grimaced. "Four."

Henry nodded toward the library. "Best get to it; I'll go check on Jean Paul and the cousins." Once the boy did as told, Henry headed toward the barn. Might as well saddle up and take a ride.

No good excuse had presented itself all afternoon to go where he really wanted.

A light knock pulled May away from her rewrite. Could it be

Henry? She pinched her cheeks. "Come in."

The bedroom door eased open. Mammy backed in holding a silver tray laden with a lovely porcelain teapot, cups, and what May figured must be a little cream pitcher. An elegant set; Sue must have had great taste.

May never dreamed folks in Texas had such treasures, much less used them.

"Afternoon. Thought you ladies might enjoy a tea break."

"Yes, ma'am. That sounds wonderful, but only if you'll join us."

"Oh, Miss May, I'd have to get my cup and –"

"No, you don't." Mary Rachel held hers out. "We can share."

Mammy looked around; the girl jumped up and offered the woman her chair. "Sit here; I need to visit the water closet anyway." She quickly stacked her pages and cleared a place for the tray then headed out.

May smiled. If Henry proved to be half the person his daughter was... She let the thought drift away. The man obviously just wasn't interested. Why would he be?

He told her straight up he had everything he needed or wanted right there.

A question May had wanted to ask came to mind and took the place of her thinking about Henry. "Mammy, what's your real name?"

"Oh, good Lord above, child, now let me see." She looked off squinting at nothing as though trying to see back in time. "My first mis'ess called me Peaches or Peachy, then after her, an old lady bought me. She only called me Girl, 'cept for a few other not-so-nice names."

"Shame on her."

"Yes, ma'am, but she didn't know no better I figure. I's still with her when my Jean Paul's daddy—the first Jean Paul—saw me. Working down on the wharf that day on account of the old lady rented me out."

She took a sip of tea then smiled so big, it seemed her cheeks would split in two. "The first Jean Paul, he got the Mister to buy me. My man called me Honey Child and Darlin' and whatever sweet name popped into his ol' silver head."

"So he was older?"

"Yes, ma'am, by a good bit, but I didn't pay no never mind. Best man I ever knew, then my baby boy came along. We had an old Mammy who took sick and passed on."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"She was a Christian so went straight to glory, and somebody needed to cook. Turned out to be me, and everyone started calling me Mammy. Guess it stuck. It's a good name for an old lady like me."

The door flew open. "Mammy, where's Daddy? Did he read today?"

"Yes, Miss Mary, but he's going now to check on Jean Paul and his cousins. Might catch him out by the barn."

Mary Rachel hurried to the lace-covered door on the south side of the room, flung it open, and stepped outside. May hadn't even noticed the door before. She followed the girl onto a big railed balcony. Good gracious, you could see forever.

A quarter mile down the road, Henry sat ram-rod straight atop a high-stepping black steed. At an easy lope, one might think he and the horse were one. He looked like a king leading his army off to war.

She couldn't tear her eyes away. The man literally took her breath away.

His daughter put two fingers to her mouth and let out an ear-splitting whistle. The man spun his mount around and spurred the horse into a full gallop. He slapped the reins on both sides of the animal's shoulders then leaned over its neck.

May couldn't believe it; she'd never seen anyone ride like Henry Buckmeyer.

When he neared, the girl cupped her hands around her mouth and hollered without an obvious thought of being a lady. "The water closet's broke."

May grimaced at the unladylike exhibition. Poor child. She needed a little refinement, someone to help knock off the rough edges. Her father, though a great one no doubt, probably had no idea how to teach a young woman to be gentle.

How could he, having never been one? He reined the beautiful horse to a stop just short of the row of rose bushes that guarded the south side of the house.

"Mary Rachel, don't ever do that again." He spoke in a stern tone that surprised her. Had he used it on May, she'd have crumbled.

His daughter, on the other hand, acted as though it had little effect on her. "But Daddy, the water closet is broke, and you were riding off."

"And that's worth getting me and The Black killed?"

"Oh, Daddy, it isn't going to kill that horse to run a little bit. And no one in the whole state rides better than you." The girl shook her head. "Can you fix it, please?"

"I'll be right up."

May stepped back into the room. The serving tray was gone, but two steaming cups of tea remained. She pushed her curls back and stopped her hand halfway to her cheeks.

He wasn't coming to see her.

Besides, his plans had been interrupted, and now he would be

mad. Probably not even notice her presence. He'd rush in, fix the thing, then be gone. Get back to checking on his hired help.

A light rap sounded on the door then it eased open. "Ladies?"

Mary Rachel jumped up. "Come on in, Daddy." She went and threw her arms around the man's chest. "And I am sorry, truly. I shouldn't have used our emergency whistle like I did."

The man chuckled. "Your mother would get so mad at me for teaching you how to do that." He hugged her back and glanced at May. "Told us both more than once a lady shouldn't whistle like a man." He squeezed a little tighter then patted her back.

May's heartbeat fluttered then quickened. She barely smiled, anxious to look away. Her cheeks burned at their open display of affection. She wished she was in his embrace, that his strong arms wrapped her in that manner.

Oh gracious! She absolutely had to stop thinking about him hugging her.

Certainly, he would never have interest in a spinster novelist. She put on her best parlor room smile then turned toward him just as he opened his arms and Mary Rachel stepped back. His eyes met hers.

Her breath caught in her throat. Oh, had he heard her gasp? Had it been audible?

Then he smiled, and the room brightened. It seemed a cloud floated off from shadowing the sun.

Though Henry moved toward the door, his eyes remained locked onto hers, seized her momentarily, his prisoner. She'd volunteer for a life sentence in his calaboose.

Then he looked toward the water closet. "Uh, what's it doing?"

It only took him one trip for tools and parts to make the commode operative again. He explained it to Mary Rachel, but May couldn't concentrate on the words for the sound of his voice.

She loved the depth of his soothing baritone. Did he sing? Could she stand it if he did? And whether he could or not, she imagined surely he could dance.

Everyone could; what pure bliss to get the man on a ballroom floor and have a respectable reason for his hands to touch her. The right side of her mid-back tingled at the thought of his personal contact.

The door closed, and he was gone. She wished he hadn't left so quickly. She loved the way he'd looked at her. Or was her imagination running away with her? Had she read more into his gaze than she should?

Why, he'd practically stared at her, hadn't he? Seemed like two full minutes or more. Oh, gracious! Making a mountain out of an ant hill like a school girl. And her forty-one years old!

Nearing half a century.

The man was only being polite. Without any doubts, he could have any number of women, young or old. Why had she thought he'd want her? Not a reason in the world.

He didn't know her, and once he did, it would be for certain he wouldn't be interested. Who but blood kin would want to be around such a stubborn, obstinate woman so set in her ways?

Besides, Henry was still in love with his dead wife.

Mary Rachel slipped back into her seat and found her place, took a sip of tea with obvious care, then returned to her work. May picked up her own cup; she needed to put the girl's father out of her idiotic thoughts and concentrate on the manuscript.

She had a deadline. It relieved her that the girl didn't want to talk about her father, how wonderful he was. Did Mary Rachel know the effect Henry had on women?



She'd caught him staring at her. Henry should have said something, but Mary Rachel was there. For sure he'd made a fool out of himself. He hoped his daughter hadn't noticed.

That's exactly what he'd done. May was barely older than Rebecca. Henry put his tools back in the barn, retrieved The Black from the front hitching post, then headed out again.

He'd told Charley he'd check on the hog pen. Wouldn't do for anything to put off the hunt. The older boy would understand, but to Houston and Bart, tomorrow was already half a lifetime away; another day would be an unbearable wait.

No, he best see to it that come morning, nothing hindered him from taking those boys on the anticipated grand adventure.

Like he figured, Jean Paul didn't need him, had everything well under control, but watching the men work proved a welcomed distraction. He even swung the post maul a few times on the fence post.

Manual labor was good for the soul, especially a troubled old fool's. He resisted the urge to match whops with Jean Paul's biggest cousin. What did they just call the guy?

Henry hated it that he wasn't good on names; Sue had been so handy. If he couldn't remember, she'd figure it out and call the person by name. He looked skyward.

She understood. Right?

A sweet peace settled over his soul. He'd fulfilled his vow—until death do us part—just like she had fulfilled hers not to remarry without her father's blessing. And he'd even gone beyond.

She'd been with the Lord six years, and he still loved her as much

as he ever did.

But mercy, he hadn't realized how much he wanted a woman in his life until May Meriwether strolled into his line of vision. He chuckled to himself. Reading three of her books had given him such insight to the woman.

She reminded him most of Marge in the one where the lady married that rich guy. *Lady Luck's Apple Orchard Romances* or something sappy like that. What an imagination May had. Well, he wasn't a thing like W.G. Preston, except he did have plenty of money.

But apparently, so did May.



"There." May blotted the page. "That's enough for today." She leaned back in her chair.

Mary Rachel lifted her quill then looked up and smiled. "Your timing is perfect. My hand..." The girl blotted her own page then shook her fingers. "But I can do more if you need me to."

May daubed her neck with her lace-trimmed hanky. "No, I'm ready to do something different, and I'm sure you are, too. Let's go see if we can help Mammy and the girls."

"Yes, ma'am."

May loved the expression on Henry's face when he noticed her coming in carrying a bowl of steaming mashed potatoes. She loved it even more when he took her hand for the blessing.

Not that the prayer would do any good, like if there was a God up there, he could make bad food better. Certainly, Mammy's fried chicken didn't need any help.

Absolutely exceptional, like the rolls and gravy. Simply exquisite; everything was delicious. Had she eaten anything the lady cooked that was inferior?

"Daddy, we want to go, too."

The man set his fork down and faced the girl who sat next to Mary Rachel, Gwendolyn if May had it right. His seating them in age order helped her. "Go where?"

"In the morning. With you and the boys. CeCe and I want to go. We'll stay in the wagon, but we think it'll be fun."

He looked from her to the lady next to Mammy's son. "What about you, Laura, do you and Lacey want to come along, too?"

"No, sir. I've seen enough of them ugly hogs. We're happy to stay right here."

"How about you, my wee Bonnie Claire?"

"No, sir, Daddy. I don't like hogs. I want to stay here with Lacey."

"Well." He turned his gaze back to Gwendolyn. "I don't think it's a

good idea, not without someone to watch over you.”

“Oh, Daddy. That isn’t fair.” The girl pouted then immediately smiled with widened eyes. “What if Mary Rachel goes?”

“No, Gwen. I’ve got work to do.”

“Wait, we can both go. I’ve never been hunting before.” May could not believe the words that just came out of her mouth. Was she so desperate to be around the man?

He turned toward her. “Can you handle a gun?”

“I certainly can. Chester taught me.”

He shrugged. “Fine by me. It’s settled then.” He smiled. “Breakfast at four. We need to be in the bottoms before the sun.”

What? Four o’clock in the morning?

Good gracious, what had she agreed to?

He expected her to get up in the middle of the night?

Chapter



Nine

“Ma’am?”

May forced one eye open. Mary Rachel stood by her bed holding a way-too-bright oil lamp in one hand and a steaming porcelain cup that she hoped held coffee in the other.

“Time to get up.”

She rolled over, scooted back, then accepted the cup. “Thank you, dear. How long do I have before breakfast?”

Turned out not near enough, and instead of the usual civilized sit down meal, Mammy’s fabulous biscuits and homemade pear preserves, slabs of ham, huge slices of ruby red tomatoes, and possibly the best gravy she’d ever eaten were gobbled on the fly.

She’d not given a thought about what to wear the night before and ended up in a rather unflattering calico dress that Chester had bought for her in Jefferson.

The man usually had better taste. One look in the full length mirror, and she wanted to change, but Mary Rachel insisted her father would leave without them. And her hair, goodness gracious.

Why had she ever volunteered to go hog hunting? They should’ve warned her how insanely early they left. Surely Henry would take one look at her today and run the other direction.

But then it didn’t matter after all. He and the other men and boys rode ahead as if they cared less whether or not the wagon even followed. The man’s New Blue and three or four other mongrels ran after them.

Riding the hard bench through the pitch black night—well, morning, but might as well have been night, it couldn’t possibly be any darker—had her second-guessing her decision.

Texas’ August heat was unbelievable, even so early in the morning. The creak of leather and subdued conversations to the fore indicated she and the girls in the noisy catch wagon remained on the right path.

She hadn’t a clue how Mary Rachel knew which way to go. The girl slapped the reins. “Ho now, mules.”

Proficiently handling the team, she proved May's premature apprehension pointless. The harnessed beasts obeyed her every command. The young woman truly was remarkable, a lot like her father.

"This is one of the two wagons Mama and Daddy took on the Jefferson Trace back in '32, the year before I was born. Carried eight bales of cotton on each, two tons per wagon at five hundred pounds a bale."

"My goodness, that's a lot of weight. How did your mother ever get it loaded? I had no idea a wooden wagon could —"

"Normally they couldn't, but these were built extra sturdy, and I haven't one notion how Mama got the lint aboard, never thought to ask. Levi'd know though."

"I'm looking forward to meeting him."

"Mama's first husband—a man named Andrew Baylor—and his brother used them for hauling timber, so they could handle the heavy loads just fine."

What an interesting tidbit. "Your mother was married before?"

"Yes, ma'am. Her first husband and his brother both passed in an accident right after they got to Texas. That's why she raised Levi."

"I didn't know."

"Anyway, on that trip to market in New Orleans is when my parents fell in love. You should get Rebecca to tell you all about it once she gets back. She's an excellent storyteller."

So, Sue had been a widow; made her all the stronger to survive out in this wild territory. And with two children. May sat a bit taller, since Henry's wife had been a widow, and now him a widower—maybe there was hope after all.

"Yes, I will. What about your father? Had he been married before?"

"Oh, no, ma'am. He only loved Mama."

"How sweet." May forced herself to smile, but for some reason, it hurt her heart to hear such a thing. She could hardly imagine the kind of woman Sue Baylor Buckmeyer must have been.

She figured full well, a scribbling novelist could never hold a candle in comparison. No, the dead wife would always stand between her and Henry—and his children—if May ever got him to pay her any real attention.

What was she even thinking? The man would never be attracted to the likes of her, not when he could take his pick. She allowed herself a ray of sun amongst her morose musings.

She'd certainly be able to put this hog hunt into one of her Lone Star novels. She grinned in the darkness, and a little laugh escaped.

"What's funny?"

“Oh, I was only laughing at myself thinking about including this middle-of-the-night adventure in one of my future Wild West stories. It tickled me that I’ve obviously conceded to writing more than one Texas Romance novel.”

Except she’d make hog hunting a bit more exciting. Maybe not mention the hard bench seat.

“Whoa!” She grabbed her hat and the side of her seat. Or being jarred to death rolling over the rough terrain in the dark. “Gracious! Why is it so bumpy?”

“Cracks in the ground. It’s been a dry summer, and this black land is notorious for opening up. Plus the hogs. They can root up a pasture something terrible.”

The eastern sky lightened some by the time Mary Rachel drove the mules over a heavy timber bridge that spanned a wooded creek.

“Just down there.” She pointed south. “That’s where Mama’s first husband and Uncle Levi’s daddy were killed. The oxen slipped, and the wagon tumbled.”

A shiver ran up May’s back. Had Sue hated passing the spot? She turned her gaze forward, didn’t want to see the macabre place where two men died.

Vague shapes became distinguishable ahead. The dogs ran among the men on horses. Each species seemed oblivious to the others.

“It must have been terrible for your mother.”

“Yes, ma’am. She was expecting, too. Rebecca came seven months later.” The girl slapped the reins over the mules’ backs.

The pair strained to pull the wagon up the little rise on the creek’s far side. Once at the top, she reined them to a stop. A field stretched out before the team, bounded on the far side by a thick line of tree-shaped shadows.

The expanse of dark earth melded into the morning’s grays and blues all the way to the sky. Mounted men moved silently in the distance, but there wasn’t enough light to see who was who or much of anything.

Seemed a bit foggy or misty.

May touched Mary Rachel’s arm and whispered, “Why are we just sitting here?”

“Daddy said for us to wait once we crossed the Langford. Said the sounder’s been rooting in this field of a morning. The wagon’s trace chains might spook ‘em.”

“So what are the men doing?”

“They’re circling around ‘em. Once it gets light enough to see good, they’ll sic the dogs on ‘em.”

With each tic of Chester’s gold watch—wherever it and the man happened to be at the moment—the bench seemed to get harder.

Though plenty warm, at least the temperature wasn't so oppressive in the darkness of a new day.

And to think she could be back in that most wonderful feather bed of Mary Rachel's. But no, she had to open her mouth and agree to come so the little girls could. Who was she trying to impress?

Well, that wasn't a hard question.

The little Buckmeyer ladies' good-looking father, that's who. But he focused all his attention on stalking the stupid pigs, instead of her. She let out a heavy sigh then yawned.

When would she ever learn?

In the quietness, she admired the expanse of Texas as the pre-dawn lightened the sky above the treetops. Never dreamed she'd be out in the middle of the night to chase hogs though.

Neither could she have imagined that she'd meet a man like Henry or accept his invitation to move into his home—sit in his dead wife's chair. But no regrets. Quite the contrary, so very glad she'd decided to come to the Lone Star State .

With all these adventures and experiences, she might just write a whole series of novels set in the wonderful new addition to the Union.

"Look!" CeCe sat behind her, right in front of the big metal cage and pointed over May's shoulder. "There they are. Can you see 'em? Over there! And there's some more."

For a heartbeat, May didn't see the hogs, then someone hollered, and all the hounds raced toward the middle of the field. The quiet, still morning erupted into a melee of running, squealing hogs, shouting men and boys, and the barking of canine.

Throw in the little girls right behind her shrieking and clapping, and May decided instantly that she hated hunting and would never go again—ever.

Watching the men fascinated her though. Real quick, they had a passel of hogs surrounded. What had Mary Rachel called the bunch of swine?

A sounder. What an odd name for a herd of hogs. It'd be interesting to find out how it came about—if she could. Her policy had been if she thought it interesting, her readers probably would, too.

The dogs closed in on the wild hogs and bunched them up for the mounted men who rode toward them, tightening their circle. If they weren't going to shoot them, what were they going to do?

"Ho now." The girl slapped the reins over the mules' backs. "Easy, boys." Mary Rachel held the leather between her fingers as though she'd been driving all her life, probably had.

She pulled the wagon up close to the edge of the circle. The smaller porkers squealed from the middle of the cluster, while the

bigger ones held the outside perimeter lunging at the dogs.

May closed her eyes and imprinted the sounds on her mind's ear. She had to get this right because she never intended to come again. She breathed in the scents, the fresh plowed earth mixed with the horses, dogs, and hogs smells.

A faint hint of jasmine mixed with the other harsher odors.

Sudden, high pitched screams all around her pulled her eyes open. The Buckmeyer girls screeched and pointed wildly.

On the ground, Little Bart held onto a rope attached to a huge hog at the other end. Charley lay tangled on top of him in the dirt. The horse they'd been riding backed away.

And the biggest hog of the sounder raced toward the boys, the hog securely around his middle.

No! May's heart leapt into her throat.

She stood.

The boys would never survive the swine's attack. Her head and chest pounded. She didn't want to see, but couldn't turn away. Her scream erupted of its own.

The black blur streaked toward the helpless children.

Suddenly, Henry's mount slid toward them almost sitting on its hind haunches. In one motion, the man stepped off the horse, set Houston to the side, then dove toward the hog and grabbed a back leg.

He yanked the charging boar away from the pile of little boys, swinging him off course.

The biggest of Jean Paul's cousins joined the man, and quicker than May would have bet possible, the giant porker grunted in the cage behind her. It charged the bars.

Jerking back every time, she chided herself for being a sissy, not that she wasn't. And not that she cared if anyone knew it. She hated hunting all the more. No amount of money could....

How in the world Henry had saved those boys. Subdued the brute. She could barely believe—even though she witnessed it with her own eyes. What kind of man was he?

How had he gotten off that horse and sat his boy on the ground then grabbed that pig in a blink of an eye?

Later, with the last hog stowed safely in the cage, he caught her staring at him. Her heart fluttered, but she didn't look away. Instead, her lips spread into a wide grin.

She shook her head, then mouthed amazing. He tipped his hat and returned her smile. Had she ever known such a man as this Texian?

That question echoed from her heart to her head as the sounder was transported to the holding pen, then accompanied her all the way back to the big house. She hated that she'd not had any time alone

with the man.

So many questions kept rising that she wanted to ask him.

A part of her wanted to go straight upstairs and write it all down, but no need to worry. She'd never forget this morning, going from total boredom to complete chaos in a single beat of her heart.

Never would she have believed it would have come off like it did. She poured herself a cup of coffee and retreated to the front porch. Before the third sip, footfalls set her heart to pitter-pattering.

But it was the boy, not his father.

His golden locks must have come from his mother. His beautiful blue eyes, identical to his Pa's looked into hers. For a long minute, he just stood at her knees and searched her eyes then finally spoke. "Miss May?"

She rocked forward and stroked his hair. "Yes, Houston? Did you have fun this morning? Were you scared?"

"Yes, ma'am." He traced the veins on her hand then glanced up grinning that adorable little boy expression she'd seen on Henry. "I liked when Pa grabbed that boar the best. I was fixin' to get him, but Pa beat me to him."

May smiled, but didn't call the boy's bluff.

He went quiet and stared again. Finally, he lifted her hand, moving it out of his way and climbed up into her lap. "What's my mama like?"

His question took her aback. She sat her cup down on the side table. "Why, I don't know, sweetie. I never got to meet her."

"Oh." He looked off for a minute then turned back. "'Cause it's so big? When you go back, think you could find her? Then you can come tell me."

May studied on the boy and his curious words. Had they told him his mother had gone to New York instead of died giving birth? Why would Henry allow such a thing?

She didn't know what to say.

He twisted around, reached back, and rubbed her shoulder. "S'pose you can show me your wings? I won't tell anyone."

"Wings? Sweetheart, I don't have wings."

"Oh." He laid his head on her chest, and she rocked.

It felt so comfortable. He didn't say anything for a long while, then she decided to find out. "Houston?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Why would you think I had wings like a bird?"

He ducked his head first then looked up and giggled. "'Cause I knowed you're an angel, but I didn't tell no one." He touched her face. "You're so pretty."

Her heart fluttered. "Oh, Houston. That's the nicest thing anyone's

ever said to me.” Her eyes teared. She wrapped the boy in her arms and hugged him tight.

For the longest, he returned her hug then he leaned back. “I wish you knew my mama in Heaven. She's with Jesus.”

She choked back a little sob. And did her best not to let the tears filling her eyes fall, but she couldn't stop them. She laid her head on top of the little boy's and held him tight.

His little hand squeezed between her and the back of the rocker, and he rubbed her shoulder blades. She grinned. He was trying to feel those wings.

What was it with these Buckmeyer men? Even the little one tugged at her heart. How could she ever stand leaving this place?

She rocked. “I wish I could have known her, too. It's a real nice thing to think I'm an angel, Houston, but I don't know about heaven and all that.”

“It's a beautiful place. Pa said so. He likes you, and so do I.” He said it with the sweet innocence of a six-year-old. “Pa thinks you're real pretty, too, like me. Told me this morning while we was waiting for it to get light enough.”

“He did?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

She continued to rock and contemplate the precious child, thought he might have dozed off until he sat up straight.

“Hey, Sunday's coming, and I get to show you to Daniel at church. He's my friend.”

She forced a smile and hoped the boy didn't see through her.

Chapter



Ten

May rocked and studied the farmland below while the boy's deep breaths fell into a steady rhythm. One of the porch's floorboards creaked slightly, and Houston's ten-year-old cousin tiptoed up.

Standing beside her, Charlie touched the little fellow's arm. "Your pa wants you in the barn."

The six-year-old sat up and rubbed his eyes with both fists. "Huh? What?" He shook off his nap.

"Uncle Henry said to find you. You've got chores, and he wants you to brush out The Black. Now git."

May rocked forward and helped Houston to his feet. He gave her an angelic smile, punched Charlie on the way by, then raced away toward the barn.

"Miss May? You know that book you wrote?"

"Which one, sweetheart, I've written quite a few."

"I'm talking about that Apple Tree book. I sure thought that Miss Vicki lady should've won the contest and married that Preston guy."

"Oh, you did?"

"Yes, ma'am, she's the prettiest. But she don't, does she?"

May laughed. "Just how much have you read?"

"Not near enough, and the Major's liable to be home any minute now. Those bratty girls won't tell me what happens, so I can write my book report. Will you?"

"If I did, wouldn't that be cheating?"

"Well, kind of sort of. A little bit, I guess. But I'm thinking we could make a trade. That'd make it fair, wouldn't it?"

"Trade what?"

"Well, I know all kinds of stuff, and you know stuff, so how about I ask you questions, and you ask me questions? One for one."

Oh, May didn't know about that. Helping Charley out was liable to land her in hot water. Then again, it never hurt having a man on the inside.

"How about instead of telling you what happens, I read it to you? Would you like that?"

"Ain't got 'nuff time. What if the Major and Mama get home?" In one motion, he crossed his feet and sat on the floor. "I say let's go back to trading."

"So what's this information you've got to trade?"

"Depends on your question." He grinned and seemed to twinkle his blue eyes at her as though he could flirt her into agreeing. What a little scoundrel. "I've got all kinds of answers, ma'am."

"Oh, you do."

"Yes, ma'am." He looked around, obviously making sure no one was watching or listening. "Go ahead, ask me a question."

"I don't know, Charley."

"Alright then, here's a free one, so you can see firsthand the value of my trade goods." He glanced toward the door again then leaned in. "CeCe just now snitched to Uncle that you was out here sitting in his chair. Now he don't let anyone sit in his rocker, but he told her it was fine, not to say anything to you."

A whoop pulled him around to the north, a cloud of dust hung on the horizon. Amidst the cloud, three riders racing toward the house in front of a slower moving wagon.

"Oh, no. I'm doomed now. It's the Major and Mama and Captain Rusk and Aunt Rebecca."

May pulled Charley to her and whispered in his ear. "Preston loved Marge at first sight and only used all the other women as a diversion to test her and see if she loved him for himself or his money. In the end, he sends all the other women home and marries Marge, and they live happily ever after."

He kissed her on the cheek. "Thanks, Miss May! I owe you!" Then he ran off toward the riders. "Major! Mama!"

Amidst the pandemonium of hugs and handshakes, the chaos of kisses and greetings, May rocked on the porch totally amazed. What a truly remarkable clan.

Was Henry to be credited for all the love passing around? Certainly the little Buckmeyers hadn't fallen far from their father's tree. And if the two lawmen proved half as heroic as the articles she'd read, then they were the most...real.

That's what they were. Real. All of them.

Acquainted with more than a few blue bloods back East, she'd witnessed firsthand how their wealth and political power garnered all their attention, to the detriment of relationships with their loved ones.

How many of the wives and grown daughters told her that her books were the only romance they experienced? How they so appreciated living vicariously through her heroines and their love stories?

Though it appeared that Henry had gold coins aplenty, his focus

remained on his family, not amassing more coins. Everything stopped to welcome home their travelers, all chores less important.

Even Mammy came out for a round of hugs. Chester followed her as far as the porch then stayed, standing beside May.

“Aren’t they amazing, Chester?”

“Yes, ma’am, they surely are.”

The family’s love was so obviously genuine. It panged her heart that she’d never known such, not in all her life.

Before the roar died completely, more screams and giggles and the little ladies clapping and jumping welcomed a covered wagon pulled by four mules.

She loved it until she laid eyes on the young woman driving the team. By the time it stopped in front of the house, the children surrounded it.

“Rebecca, I missed you.”

“Did you bring me a birthday present? I turned eight while you were gone.”

“Get down, Rebecca. Hurry up and hug me.”

The oldest daughter stood at the bench seat and loosed her locks from the bonnet. Even covered with trail grime and dust, she was a beautiful creature.

And if she truly was the spitting image of her deceased mother, no wonder Henry remained lovesick for his dead wife. Why, no one could compare. May didn’t stand a chance.

It pleased her that the man made a point of introducing her to Major Levi Baylor and his wife Rose, and Captain Wallace Rusk, and Rebecca, of course. His eyes literally sparkled looking at his daughter.

She probably knew she was his favorite.

May smiled.

He was only being his polite self.

After the glad-to-meet-you’s flowed freely and promises punctuated the get-together-soon’s, she retreated upstairs. Now more than ever, she needed to get her rewrite finished.

The Rangers could be interviewed now, then she and Chester could get out of Texas before it was too late. She had to escape before her heart got broken again.

For the rest of that day and most of the next, aside for meals, she and her scribe stayed upstairs and worked at their scribbling. Mary Rachel seemed as determined as she to complete her copy of the manuscript.

May so appreciated the girl’s dedication. She would truly miss her presence once she returned to New York. Though they barely spoke, May enjoyed her being there.

She gave no credence to the young woman’s father’s gentle

squeezes to her hand during the blessings at meals. Neither did she pay any attention to how often he glanced her way or how many times he directed his smooth beautiful baritone toward her.

No, indeed. Especially since on his left, all scrubbed and coiffured and glowing, sat maybe the most beautiful woman she's ever seen to constantly remind him of his lost love.

On the afternoon of her third day in Henry's home, a notion wormed its way in amongst an intriguing conversation between her storybook hero and heroine.

What if Mister Buckmeyer had grown tired of golden haired, green eyed, perfect porcelain dolls?

Oh, goodness gracious! Why did she keep going there?

What could he ever see in her? With a nose wide as a house and lips.... Well, she'd been told they were kissable, but only by cad; their sole purpose for the flattery to sweet talk her right out of her pantalettes.

But Henry...he wasn't like that, was he? The only times she'd been around him, the children were present.

"Mary Rachel, does your father have a lady friend?" May swallowed hard and hoped her ears played tricks on her, because she could swear she just said that aloud. She slowly turned.

The girl giggled. "No, ma'am, not a one since Mama. Oh, there've been lots of ladies who want to be his friend alright, but he's never shown a bit of interest in any of them.

"I've often thought...." She looked toward the window as if searching a great distance. "Anyway, he makes a point of never going to town without me or Gwendolyn, or Rebecca. We protect him."

The door eased open. "Hello? Did I hear my name?" The oldest sister strolled into the room. "You two have sequestered yourselves up here forever. Aren't you finished?"

She held out both hands toward May, so she lay her quill down, rose, and took them. "I haven't had time to tell you, Miss Meriwether, but I love your books. I've read them all. And I'm so excited you want to write a romance about Levi and Rose."

May smiled. "Why, thank you. That's a very kind thing to say. And please, call me May, won't you?"

"I assure you it's the truth, so help me God. But I must suggest that you should write about Mama and Daddy falling in love on our trip to Jefferson first. That's where it all started. You could call it Love on the Jefferson Trace."

"Oh, no. Well, yes on the story." The younger sister jumped up. "But I've been thinking. What about calling it THE GRANGER? You know, since Mama was a farmer? Then Levi's book could be THE RANGER?" She glanced at her sister. "Isn't it so exciting, having May

Meriwether here? And to think we'll get to read about our parent's love –"

"Easy, girls." May laughed. "Believe it or not, I don't get to pick the title, I only make suggestions. My publisher thinks he knows best as far as choosing a good marketable title." She squeezed Rebecca's hands then let go. "Besides, I have to finish this one before starting another."

"That's understandable, but your new novel doesn't have a thing to do for my reason to come up here. All the sisters are begging to go swimming. Haven't you done enough for today? Please say you'll come with us."

Swimming? She hadn't been in years—many, many years. "That sounds wonderful."

She did it again, said a thought out loud; agreed readily to go swimming and quit working. But the room did get so hot in the late afternoons. The water would refresh her so much.

"Daddy said we could?"

Rebecca nodded. "Actually, he said that was fine with him. Right after I promised that between you, me, and Rose, one of us would be on dry ground at all times with the gun. Oh, and I told him we'd take Newly. He's heating water for the bathhouse."

May loved the interaction between the two, the subtle nuances. "What about all the boys? Aren't they going? I'd imagine they'd have a conniption fit if we left them behind."

"They won't care. Their Uncle Levi and the captain are taking them fishing before they get scrubbed clean for church tomorrow."



Henry bent down, raked the coals, then slipped in another oak stick. He pulled the lever and released a bit of the water in the tub and swiped his hand under the flow.

Too hot. He opened the valve and released more water from the tower into the tank. After a minute or three, he tested the temperature again, then stopped the cold water, stepped back, and studied his bathhouse.

Wasn't as big or fancy as the Roman ones he'd read about, but he didn't know anyone in all of Red River County or any of the neighboring ones either who had anything to compare.

The cypress and limestone weren't marble and inlaid gold, but his suited him and was way more practical. Plus, he and Sue had built it together.

Suddenly, it dawned on him that this was the first Saturday evening in six years he hadn't teared up heating the bath water for his

babies. Maybe his time of mourning had come to its end.

He looked around. He'd built the bathhouse for Sue, and the big house. They were hers and his and held so many memories. He sighed. Should he go west, escape all this and start making some new memories?

The land there in the Red River Valley belonged to her and Levi. Well, he'd more than quadrupled the Baylor brothers' original holdings. Could be time to follow that dream to Llano, do something different.

But he hated splitting the family up, too. Mercy, the clan had grown so big. If he'd read Wallace right, Rebecca had turned him down one more time. Might do the both of them good to have several hundred miles separating them.

Probably a good idea to go ahead and get everything legally separated. Levi and Rose could have the big house, and he could build himself one even grander, make it bigger.

An image of him and May pouring over a set of plans floated across his mind's eye.

Oh, Lord, please do not let me act like a silly old man. She's so young and famous. Why in the world would she want to stay there in Texas?



What a wonderful treat! Except for the snake. May didn't much care for it when Rebecca blew off the water moccasin's head. Texas women were as tough as the men.

She didn't like it either when New Blue thought a snake snack peachy keen delicious. But, oh, that pocket of cold water right in front of the levy; now that was to die for.

The dash from the wagon to the bathhouse exhilarated her—then seeing it. Who would have ever thought to build such a nice place to bathe out in the woods?

Perhaps Henry would agree to adopt her, be her daddy, too, and she could live out the rest of her days in Texas. Chester seemed perfectly content to sit in Mammy's kitchen and chat the days away. May had even caught him helping chop vegetables.

While Miss Laura oversaw the little girls getting clean, May and the ladies tended to the mules and wagon. Well all she did was watch in amazement.

Rebecca and Rose unhitched the harness while Mary Rachel put grain and hay in the animals' stalls. The three worked like they had done it a thousand times.

And the barn, a work of art in itself. The notched beam overhead

fit perfectly into the post's notch and then nothing but little old wooden pegs held them together.

Really, what kind of man was Henry Buckmeyer? She'd read about Caesar building a bridge in three days, but he had five legions of men to do the work. How many in a legion? Oh, yes, a thousand.

No wonder.

On second blush, the fantasy didn't work. She didn't want to be Henry's daughter, she wanted to be his wife, wake up every morning beside him. Listen to him talk about everything from peanuts to politics.

Her desire to know him so inside and out—that ate at her day and night. He would become a part of her, and she would be as close as his next shave. Oh, May, May, May. A romance writer should be able to come up with something better than that.

As much fun as swimming with the little girls had been, she'd so much rather frolic in the water with their daddy. Of its own, her hand pressed against her tummy.

Would he want another baby?

The inside of the bathhouse showed the thought and care that went into its building and impressed her even more than the outside. The tub must have been eight foot in diameter, held all the little girls together at one time.

They seemed to have as much fun bathing as swimming in the lake. They helped wash each other's hair at a number two wash tub set up on the wall just for that purpose. Their daddy truly thought of everything.

With all the little ones squeaky clean, Rebecca waved both hands, fingers pointing down as though sweeping. "Now all you little ladies skedaddle on up to the house. See if you can talk Daddy into reading you a story before supper. Get, get, get now, and leave us alone."

Mary Rachel obviously loved being included in with the big girls. "Yes, indeed, shoo! You, too, Gwendolyn. You see them to the house without getting dirty."

The fifteen-year-old glared. "That isn't fair."

"What?" Mary Rachel made a face. "What does Daddy always say? Life isn't fair! So please, GB, take 'em on up to the house."

The ladies all peeled down to their camisoles and pantalettes, talking and laughing and sharing, so May followed their lead.

In the tub, they spread out and rested their arms along its top edge.

"So, Rebecca Ruth, did Wallace propose again?" Mary Rachel's tone sounded more than a little bit bored.

"Yes, the man simply will not take no for an answer."

"He sure wouldn't have to ask me twice."

“Sister! I never knew you were interested in Wallace Rusk. When did all this happen?”

“I don’t know. He’s handsome and funny. I think he’d make a grand husband and have never understood all your rejections.”

Rose shook her head. “Oh, Mary Rachel, don’t be in such a hurry to marry. Enjoy being a young single woman as long as you dare. Believe me. Marrying at fifteen is not as much fun as it may seem at your age.”

Rebecca kicked her feet and rippled the water. “I might consider him more seriously if he weren’t a lawman—always gone and always in danger—and I’ve clearly indicated as much, but he’ll never quit. I’d never marry a Texas Ranger.”

“Whoa now, sisters.” Rose dunked her head and came up smiling, her face framed in fiery red. “Let’s not speak negatively of being married to a man with such an honorable profession. Why, no one could even guess how many lives my Levi has saved. Mine included.”

May loved the banter. She’d never experienced having sisters, or even enjoyed close women friends she could confide in, speak of love with. Always considered that one of the reasons she turned to writing romance novels.

Dare she share?

“What kind of wood is this tub made from that holds water? It’s so smooth.”

Rose smiled. “Cypress, it’s native to these parts, grows around swamps and rivers. You came through Jefferson, didn’t you? They’re known for their Cypress Lake there.”

May giggled. “You used all three forms of ‘there’ in one sentence. I’ll have to remember that. It’s fun.”

Rebecca splashed water at her younger sister. “So, little cheater, getting to read Miss May’s next novel before all the rest, do you love it? Tell us about it.” She looked to May. “Can she?”

Her scribe smiled broadly and nodded. “It’s her best yet.” She pulled her shoulders upwards and closed her eyes. “It’s set in France, on the Riviera, so romantic, and oh, so....”

She opened her eyes. “Just you wait.” She turned to May. “I’m hoping you might allow me to be your permanent scribe. If you’re happy with my penmanship, I mean. And I don’t even want any pay.”

May laughed. “Dear Mary Rachel, no one in the world would say anything bad about your lovely script. I’d be honored to have you, but I’m not certain your father would agree with you coming back to New York with me.

“Besides, I might even go on west. All the way to California. I’m thinking I’d enjoy doing a little prospecting, pick up a few gold nuggets.”

“Oh, that sounds so exciting.”

“What a wonderful adventure. I suppose you’d get a lot of great new ideas for your books.”

The conversation went on at least another fifteen minutes about the gold rush and how beautiful California would be and the excitement of seeing the Pacific Ocean and floating in its salt water.

Then church the next morning became the topic, who’d be there and when the next social was.

May listened closely, trying to understand why these wonderful, intelligent women would believe in a god they’d only heard stories about from a book some dreadfully old men wrote.

Did they deem her characters real as well? Whatever they thought, it didn’t matter. She loved these young ladies with an unfamiliar part of her heart.

Though she couldn’t understand the bond she experienced, she would wish nothing more than to have them all in her life until the day she died. Baylors and Buckmeyers alike.

She’d love having a tub full of daughters to adore.

Why, oh, why couldn’t she have met Henry long ago?

Before he gave his heart away to Sue?

Chapter



Eleven

Henry filled his lungs and willed himself calm.

A part of him wanted to leave her. He'd made a point of telling her that she needed to be ready by eight-thirty. However, the bigger part of him wanted her riding beside him in the buggy into town.

If she didn't come on in the next few minutes, he'd have to send Levi and Jean Paul ahead in the wagons. No need for everyone to be late.

He would not ask Mary Rachel to go upstairs again though. The rustle of petticoats pulled him around.

He blinked once, then twice, but the vision didn't vanish. May. How could one woman be so attractive? She floated down the stairs' steps with the biggest smile he'd seen since meeting her.

The dress he'd asked Laura to make her obviously pleased the lady. She did it great justice.

The pale pink bodice with lavender accents brought out her dark features, and the double wide lace at her neck—Laura's idea—the perfect touch to show off her beautiful face. A wide skirt with cascading wisteria blossoms accentuated her tiny waist.

The vision swayed toward him.

He lifted and extended his elbow. She took his arm. Her fragrance filled his senses, made him a bit lightheaded. He escorted her out and to the buggy. She took his hand to step up and into the carriage.

He climbed in after her. "You're late."

Why had he said that?

He had to stop speaking his mind, It was only a few minutes. He could make up the time.



Her smile vanished. He was angry with her, and she didn't like that. She'd hurried as fast as she possibly could, but her hair gave her fits, and she never wanted to go in the first place.

Why was she?

Why hadn't she stood up last night at supper and told him the truth? What she believed. Because she wanted to make him happy, didn't want to upset his stupid superstitions, wanted him to love her.

That's why.

"I apologize, Henry. Perhaps you should go on without me next time. It wasn't my objective to make the lot of you late to your church meeting."

Her tone sounded sharper than she'd intended, but his rebuke irritated her to the core. He should realize her sacrifice to even go and appreciate that instead of being angry with her.

"Of course you're forgiven, but I shouldn't have said anything. I'm usually more patient, but..." He patted her hand then slapped the reins over the matched pair of blacks. "You look lovely in that new dress. Coming down the stairs, I thought...well...I'm glad you like it."

What had he thought? Why doesn't he say what's on his mind? Her mad melted into a puddle at her feet, and she glanced over.

"Laura said you asked her to sew it for me. That was so thoughtful, and it is beautiful. Thank you."

"My pleasure."

The two covered wagons pulled out after the buggy. "The Buckmeyers certainly are their own parade with everyone going together. Do you all go every Sunday?"

"Yes, ma'am. It's the highlight of our week, gathering at the Lord's house and worshipping. Gives a person the strength to make it through the next week. Don't know how the heathens make it through a day without Him."

So! He'd considered her a heathen.

Well, she could certainly tell him that she had not one bit of trouble making it through the days. Imagine! Week after week; her whole adult life without needing or believing in a fairytale, omnipotent being.

She didn't lean on some storybook deity created by man.

The horse's rhythmic clippity-clop filled the silence between her and Henry. She'd so looked forward to being alone with him, and here she was—finally—and what was she doing?

Being angry and ruining her opportunity to get to know him better. How could she show him how wonderful she could be?

His religion was a part of him. She understood that, but he'd have to give her the same understanding and accept her right not to believe.

Well, she was on her way to his Methodist church, no matter her beliefs, so she might as well make the best of it. Enjoy every minute of the time alone with the amazing man on the trip to and from.

If there could ever be any chance of romance, the subject would

definitely have to be discussed, but not this day. She took in a deep breath. "It's a beautiful morning. Cooler than the last few days."

The weather? She couldn't think of anything better than the weather?

"Yes, but I'm still hunting that first Blue Norther." He laughed. "I love Texas nine months out of the year. Seems the older I get, the more I hate the heat."

"We could trade. You, Houston, and the little ladies come to New York in the summer, and Chester and I can come here in late fall, stay for the winter months, out of all that ice and snow up north."

He glanced at her and smiled. "I'd like that. Sounds like a fine idea. You have room for all of us?"

She nodded. Certainly, she had a place for him. "Oh, yes. Chester found me a great deal on a lovely brownstone that's right across from Central Park."

"City fathers did good leaving all that green."

"It is lovely. The place took most of my last royalty check, but it was worth it. The poor woman I bought it from—her husband had died and her children wanted their share—Chester got it well under market."

The man chuckled. "Sounds like Levi. He's been buying us headrights for years. That's how we put the big ranch together."

"Headright? What is that?"

He launched into an explanation of how in Texas' early years, the politicians had offered land to entice settlers, and even a single man could get over seventeen hundred acres.

They handed the head of a family over four thousand acres. She loved the information, all of it great fodder, but more, she loved the sound of his voice.

He could believe anything he wanted to as long as he kept on bating her in that beautiful baritone.

Too soon, he reined the team to a stop in front of a quaint little rock church building up ahead on a hill. Seemed the whole town was there, or close to it from the multitudes of buggies and wagons and saddled horses tied to a long pick line.

Next to the building, a bigger, open-walled structure with pews and pulpit graced the well manicured church lawn.

Guess it made sense. Instead of the sixty or so folks milling about cramming into the building in this Texas heat, everyone could be outside but in the shade. "Isn't that a tabernacle?"

"Yes, ma'am." He jumped down, tied the team, then opened her door. She took his hand and stepped out. Then he extended his arm. How proud walking beside him made her, her hand resting on his arm.

Seemed the man knew everyone and called most by name as he introduced her on their long many-times-interrupted walk toward the building. Had to be one reason he didn't like being late.

He made a point of letting everyone know that she was the May Meriwether who had written all those wonderful romance stories that his girls loved reading.

Women claiming to be fans and avid readers of all her works stopped him along the way and gushed over her something awful. She caught Henry grinning.

A hand on his other arm stopped him. "Henry, I hoped to see you. How have you been?"

"May, this is 'Lizbeth Cooper; Liz, this is May..."

"Yes, yes, I know." The young lady extended her hand, but kept her other one on Henry's arm. "Just about everyone in town's been talking about your houseguest."

May took the woman's hand, and offered her best why-am-I-talking-to-the-likes-of-you smile. "Mis'ess Cooper."

"Actually, it's Akins." She turned back to Henry. "I've taken back my maiden name. Daniel took off better than a year ago; the judge said I didn't have to keep his name now that I was legally single again."

"I hate to hear that, Liz." He lifted her hand from his arm. May loved it. "You'll excuse us. We best take our seats."

Third row from the front. Why did he have to sit so close? There'd be no way she could possibly slip out without all his friends seeing. And that Liz creature sat right across the center aisle shooting her daggers.

Very obviously, the girl wanted to get her hooks into Henry. She understood him needing his daughters to protect him. And sitting right there in church. What a full-blown brazen hussy.

The preacher or deacon—whatever they called the man—got up and made some announcements, then another guy—was he the cantor?—took front stage, turned his hands palms up, raised them slightly, and everyone stood.

May didn't want to stand, being perfectly comfortable sitting, but she scooted forward a bit. Henry extended his hand. How could she turn down the opportunity to touch and be touched by the man?

Especially right there in the midst of all his neighbors and in full sight of his God and that legally divorced Lizbeth. Why, it almost seemed like her duty.

He helped May to her feet and gave her a little squeeze then didn't take his hand away, so she gave him a little squeeze back and hung on. A tingle ran up her arm and all the way to her heart.

It was fun to be naughty in front of God and everyone. If she

wasn't such a good, moral woman, she could show them all a thing or three, especially with Henry.

She could have him eating out of the palm of her hand if only he weren't so in love with dead Sue. She chided herself to stop being bad. She'd waited so long, and would not settle for a tumble in the hay, no matter how wonderful the man.

But would he—if she were willing? Good thing she'd never find out. So there. Let that hussy shoot her daggers. Henry Buckmeyer held May's hand.

The front fellow opened his mouth and belted out a song. Most joined in by the third or fourth word. "Streams of mercy, never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise. Teach me some melodious sonnet."

Henry said mercy a lot. Streams of never ceasing mercy. That sounded good.

His lips moved, but she couldn't make out his baritone. She quit focusing on the words and listened harder to hear him. Was he singing at all?

After two songs, rather pleasant lively tunes that May had never heard before, the cantor had everyone sit down then started another slower song. She paid careful attention to the words again.

"Sweet hour of prayer! Sweet hour of prayer! That calls me from a world of care, and bids me at my Father's throne make all my wants and wishes known." What a beautiful thought.

"In seasons of distress and grief, my soul has often found relief, and oft escaped the tempter's snare, by thy return, sweet hour of prayer!"

Oh, to have her soul relieved. Who made up all these hymns? And why hadn't she ever heard any of them before? Well, that was obvious, she didn't go to church.

She may not believe in these people's God, but still, their music pleased her deep inside. Too bad she didn't write plays. A good musical always packed the theater.

After another slow number, the deacon—if that's what they called him; she might have it wrong—got back up and told everyone to open their Bibles to some scripture.

She had one somewhere. Chester had given it to her when she was in her early twenties, but she hadn't thought to bring it. Had he packed it? Probably not, knowing she never read it.

What difference would it make anyway? Reading some long-dead-men's claims the Almighty had told them something or other in a trance or dream.

How could so many people be duped into believing that there was a loving father-type up in the sky watching over them? Like God

himself had given them the food they ate and the roof over their heads.

As if their hard labors had nothing to do with it.

Wouldn't that be great, not having to think up something to write about? Just sit there and let the Lord sling the ink for a while. What an idea.

And the nonsense that a virgin gave birth to the baby Jesus? Now that was about the hardest fairytale to swallow of them all—with the possible exception of a crucified dead-for-several-days man rising from his tomb. Hallelujah, indeed.

She tried to follow the preacher's logic, but he made too many leaps of faith. Yet no one seemed to object, like the man was stating facts, not retelling a myth.

Staring over the preacher's head, she pictured a life with Henry. The weekly trip to town wouldn't be that bad. She'd have him the other six days. What difference would it make if he wanted to believe that some dead Jew directed his life?

No one was perfect. Even though he was certainly the closest thing she'd found. He had got mad at her for being five minutes late. But to his credit, he apologized; she liked that.

And him being willing to visit New York, too. Wouldn't that be fun?

While the Lord's servant droned on—with a rather irritating nasal twang—she let visions of her and Henry strolling through Central Park glide past her inner eye, then going to the theater and a late supper.

"Everyone rise."

In a twinkle, her sweet imaginings rudely interrupted, she came back to the now, and let Henry pull her to her feet. Hopefully, it was over, except she wouldn't mind another hymn or two.

The deacon spread his hand out toward the congregation. "Go with God, my friends. Remember to stand firm against the wiles of the devil, and I'll see you right here the next Lord's Day."

Henry released her hand and extended his elbow. She enjoyed him squiring her through the throng. Outside, Levi came up. "Rose and I would like to take everyone to dinner. Our treat."

The jaunt down the wooden sidewalk to the Donoho dining room caused perspiration to trickle down her back. It wet her bodice, but at least the bit of breeze through the dampness cooled her a bit.

She still thought she might faint, the heat so stifling. She'd most certainly picked a horrible time of year to visit Texas. Why hadn't she thought to come in the late fall?

With all the clan trailing along, including Mammy, Jean Paul, and all his cousins—were they believers, too, or just paying Henry back by going to his church?—the Buckmeyer parade drew quite the

attraction.

Everyone smiled and waved and called out greetings. All the children were remarkably well behaved.

“Won’t this cost Levi an arm and a leg to feed all of us? Do you think he’d let me split the bill? It’s the least I could do after all your hospitality.”

“No, don’t fret. He’s got plenty of coin.”

Once inside, it seemed half the church folks or better showed. Most took their seats, but several of the men made a point of coming by and shaking Henry’s hand.

Some of them leaned down and whispered something in his ear. She couldn’t imagine what it might be. Were they talking about her? How rude to whisper like that.

The waitress took their order—a daunting task in itself—as though she had all the time in the world and every table in the room wasn’t full of patrons. My, my, what kind of tab was the Ranger running up?

After the lady had everyone’s choices down, she left, and the rest of the family all talked to each other. May leaned close. “What was all that whispering about?”

He shook his head and smiled. “Oh, they’re wanting me to stand for governor.”

She leaned back. governor. And she’d be the first lady of the great state of Texas. Gooseflesh rose on her arms and legs. Goodness gracious, now wouldn’t that be something.

“Are you going to run?”

Chapter



Twelve

Two days later, mid-afternoon of what had to be the hottest day yet, May studied her next page. Chapter twenty-five. Wonderful, she'd completed the rewrite.

She glanced at her right-hand helper girl. The young lady's fingers flew over the paper, leaving a neat, uniform, flowing script. Sure would make the typesetter's job easier.

She looked up. "Is something wrong, ma'am?"

"No, not at all." May smiled. Henry's baby wasn't quite as confident as her daddy. "Quite the opposite. Everything's excellent. I've just this minute finished with chapter twenty-four, and that completes the rewrite. I'm done."

"Oh, that is outstanding." The girl pointed the feathered end of her quill at her. "You ready to get started on the book about my parents? I can tell you what happened. Or do you want to wait and hear it from Rebecca?"

May wasn't sure she wanted to hear about Henry and Sue. "Well, I'd certainly love to hear that story, but Major Baylor and Captain Rusk tracking down Bold Eagle is what brought me to Texas. Hopefully he'll have time for me to interview him."

The girl seemed a bit crestfallen, but hid it well. "Oh, he'll make time. But it really does all start with Daddy. Uncle Levi would tell you that himself. If it hadn't been for Mama and Daddy falling in love –"

"That reminds me of something I've been meaning to ask. You and the older girls call your father Daddy, and the little ones, Pa. Why is that?"

"Oh, Bonnie started calling him Pa, and from then on, it stuck. Rebecca called him Daddy even before he married our mother. She never knew her own father."

"Poor thing."

"He and Uncle Levi's daddy passed in that logging accident before she was born. Uncle Levi was only five then; his mother left for heaven when he was born. He and Houston have that in common." The girl looked off. "I was eleven when Mama went to be with Jesus."

"That must have been devastating."

"Yes, ma'am." She took a minute and seemed to push her pain back into its dungeon. "Sorry. Anyway, Rebecca takes all the credit. She says if it wasn't for her, I wouldn't even be here."

"Wait." May held her hands up. "Don't tell me any more just yet. You need to work on the manuscript, so I can post it to New York. Besides, I normally take some time off between books to give these characters a chance to get out of my head."

"And if the story is as good as you say, I might have to start writing too soon." She smiled and stood, stretched, then went to the window. "So, please, promise you'll tell me more, just not yet."

"I understand, but think about it. Their story really should be your first Texas novel. Then you can write about the Major trading his favorite horse for Aunt Rose."

May turned back to the girl laughing. "No, no, you're killing me, Mary Rachel. I do want to hear, believe me, but right now, if you'll get back to your transcribing, I'll go downstairs and see if I can find a bit of breeze and perhaps something cool to drink."

"Of course." The girl stifled a giggle as though twelve and teasing May with a juicy bit of gossip about schoolmates. She leaned back over her desk and dipped the quill.

May hurried out of the room before any more of the many stories that might become her new novels spilled out from the enthusiastic angel. She would get back to them though, as soon as Mary Rachel finished her copying. Once she turned the stairs' second corner, a superb aroma wafted toward her.

She followed her nose to the back of the house where Mammy sat on an oversized stool at a large thick table working a huge knife over a row of yellow squash. Chester watched her fascinating chop method—almost like her hands danced over the yellow vegetables leaving a pile of identical round discs.

May stopped in the door. "Whatever you've got cooking smells amazing. I don't know if I can wait."

Both of them looked toward her. Mammy smiled. "Oh, Miss May, how about a cookie and sip of fresh milk to hold you off till supper?"

"Watch it, May. Her cookies are better than the ones at that little bakery you hate so much."

"No, it couldn't be possible, could it?" She slipped into the chair next to him. "Oh, alright. I suppose I should try one just to see if it could be true. And I'll take a spot of tea rather than the milk—if it's no trouble."

The lady jumped up and real quick, a steaming cup arrived along with two brown ovals. She tasted the first, instantly glad Mammy hadn't taken her request for one seriously.

“Oh, my. I give. I don’t hate that bakery anymore. There’s absolutely no comparison. What is in these cookies?”

“Aw, honey child, a pinch of this and a dash of that. Mostly I guess you could say I put love in them.” She smiled and scraped the squash off her cutting board into a pan.

May wished she had a note pad; she’d have to put that line in one of her stories. Matter of fact, the whole scene. She faced Chester. “I finished my rewrite.”

“Excellent, and how far along is your scribe?”

“Close. She might finish today, tomorrow for sure. You should plan a trip to town to get it on its way to New York. I think I’ll send Mary Rachel’s copy. Her penmanship is far better than mine.”

She leaned over and bumped shoulders with Chester. “Shouldn’t you get busy with your line edit?”

“I’ve got time, if Mary Rachel isn’t going to be finished until tonight or tomorrow morning.”

What was with him? Normally, he couldn’t wait to make sure the copy was correct so he could send it off and start negotiating the next contract.

Before she could question him further, a herd of echoing footfalls caught her attention, and she turned. The children, with Houston in the lead, hurried in her direction.

Henry brought up the rear. “Watch out, Miss May. Dirty boys coming through.” He grinned at her.

His youngest brushed past and stopped at the pump. He went to cranking, and soon, a trickle of water poured out. The other two boys washed their hands, then Charley pumped for Houston.

After them, the girls washed, but they didn’t really seem to need it, whereas she’d never beheld such grimy hands as those boys’.

“Back to the books.”

“Aww, come on. Read to us, Pa. You need to finish the story about that Roman See Zar.” Houston accented both syllables as though the title were the first and last name.

“Not today. Now light a shuck before I cut me a switch.”

Henry’s little soldiers marched off to their certain boredom. May held her smile until the last one passed by, then looked to the man, shook her head and chuckled.

“And I thought Chester was a hard task master.”

The man pulled out the chair next to May and sat. “Oh, at nap time, Miss Laura or one of the girls usually reads the babies to sleep.”

“What have you been reading to them?”



“Well.” He didn’t want her to think he was blue at the mizzen. Why did she have to ask? “Caesar’s commentaries on the Gallic Wars.” The lady leaned back like he’d surprised her. “Whose translation?” “Mine, except I just do it on the fly. I’ve never written it down.” Her eyes widened, made her even more beautiful in a funny sort of way. “You read Latin?”

“Yes, my mother pounded it in me; she thought I should be a man of letters.”

“And are you teaching them?”

“Some, I throw in a word here and there.”

“Speaking of words. Since my first day here, I’ve been wondering what was Charley speaking at dinner when Mary Rachel got on to him about his grammar? I’m fluent in several languages, but had no clue.”

“The little scalawag was rubbing it in that he speaks Comanche. He was four when Levi rescued him and his mother.”

“First your daughter, and now you. I tell you true, you Buckmeyers are likely to be the death of me.”

He loved the sound of her voice. He laughed. “Why? How? What are we doing to you?”

“I’ve only just finished my rewrite, and your favorite daughter—well, all five of them—think that next I need to write about you and their mother falling in love.

“And now, you’re teasing me with this most interesting fact that Charley spent his first four years with the Indians, then the famous Texas Ranger rescued them.

“Sounds like another great romance to me, but I usually take some time off between novels.”

“So Mary Rachel told you about her mother’s unbroken vow?”

“No, actually, she didn’t mention that, and please, I beseech you, don’t tell me more—not yet anyway.”

Chester leaned forward. “Do it, Mister Henry. Bombard her with interesting facts, and she’ll not be able to help herself. We need the income.”

For a bit, May stared at her man—or was it a glare?—then something passed between them that Henry couldn’t put his finger on, as though they shared a dark secret.

She faced him. “I would love some fresh air, and was wondering if you’d be so kind as to show me around? I’d hate to get lost and have one of those wild hogs—or something worse—get me.”

Henry stood and extended his hand. “Of course, I’d love to.”



May placed hers in his and let him help her up from the table. For the first time in her adult life, she had a sense of being a child,

and this man, her father. Could that be what she saw in Henry?

Would he have been able to best the commodore? It seemed ridiculous to even consider it, no longer than she'd known the man, but could he really be the one she'd been searching for all these years?

Once outside, New Blue appeared at his side as though the mutt had been waiting for him.

"That dog. He's always around. Would he bite if I came out alone?"

The man glanced at the animal. "His real name is New Blue, but the children call him Newly. And no, he'd never harm you in any way."

She wanted to ask how he got his name, but she'd learned better. New Blue, indeed. That had to be a story in itself, and if he told her much about Old Blue, no doubt she wouldn't be able to keep the lid on that nasty bottle of ink.

For a few minutes, she let him lead her around the house and barn, then got a short lesson on his windmill and water tank. After a few hundred paces down a wide lane with a pasture full of horses on one side and thick forest on the other, he stopped under a grand stand of huge pines.

She so appreciated the shade. The tall, straight trees surrounded a nice-sized pond like sentries guarding the pristine pool that looked as though a fairyland had been cut out of the woods.

The beautiful spot oozed tranquility.

He pointed toward a stone bench a few feet from the water's edge. "Care to sit a spell?" He extended his hand.

Taking it, she eased down. "This is an amazing place." She glanced around. Another lane ran off to the north which divided the horse pasture with what looked to be a bigger one.

She loved the fence built from tree posts, some crooked, the perfect rustic touch to separate the fields. White pickets were the norm in Virginia, and New York's were usually of black metal.

She nodded toward the pastures. "Your fencing is just right. I even like the posts' crookedness. What kind of wood are they?"

"Bois d'arc."

"I've never seen it before. This property truly is a special place."

He sat on the opposite end as far away from her as he could. Such a gentleman. "Thank you, ma'am. Levi and I spent a lot of time on the fence and this pool; we finished building this bench right before we left for San Jacinto."

"Isn't that the place where you Texians beat the Mexicans and won your independence?"

"Yes, ma'am. General Santa Anna got his due there. The victory didn't take long."

“Mary Rachel said you were a colonel.”

“Yes, ma’am. I served with Sam Houston in New Orleans. He needed someone so....”

“You’re as bad as Chester. There’s no need to ma’am me so much.” She loved how the man didn’t brag on himself. “So, is Colonel above Commodore?”

“The ma’aming’s a habit. Mother always said it never hurt to show another human being respect.” He thought for a moment. “Colonel isn’t really above Commodore. Different services. Why? You know a Commodore who needs some bossing?”

Father died on her lips, she didn’t want to lie to the man, but could she trust him with her truth? Chester would skin her alive if he knew she even contemplated telling. And why would she?

“Henry?” He made her believe she could tell him anything, comfortable and safe. “Have you ever had a deep dark secret? One that might actually hurt you bad and change your life for the worse if it became known?”

He looked off for a few beats of her heart; she loved the lines in his face and imagined each was hard won. She never should have asked him such a personal question.

Goodness gracious. What would he think? She hadn’t meant to pry, the question actually aimed more at revelation—hers.

Could she trust him? Everything in her screamed yes, but she hardly knew the man. What was it about him that gave her the idea her secret would be secure in his keeping?

Certainly, it would be a wonderful thing for someone to know, and if she did get serious with this man....

“Well, if I decide to run for governor, my secret would hurt me.”

If he ran, he’d make a great governor. Tiny butterflies fluttered in her tummy. She would love being the wife of a governor. At least he hadn’t said it wasn’t any of her business.

“Can I trust you, Henry? Are you a man who can guard a secret under all occasions?”

“Yes, ma’am. Are you a lady who can do the same?”

A part of her wanted to change the subject, but the bigger part wanted to bare her soul, let this man into her secret place, the place where even Chester never got to go.

“I can.” She extended her hand. “If what I’m about to disclose ever got out, it could bring great harm to me.”

Looking away, she studied the perfect reflection on the water’s surface and her own insides stilled, as the water. “Chester would go mad if he knew I even considered revealing our deep dark secret to you.”

She faced him again. “It’s his secret, too.”

“May, you can certainly trust me, but there’s nothing to compel you to tell me anything if you’re uncomfortable.”

“I know, but it seems so right, here, in this place.”

A study of his face convinced her she could believe. Every fiber of her being told her that she could, should share it. He really was a man to be trusted. But....

She lightly rubbed his finger with her thumb. “Henry.” Tears welled.

An urge to run flooded her soul, but her feet remained steadfast, planted in this lovely safe haven. She wanted a man like this one, longed for someone who could see the real May and still love her.

He squeezed her fingers ever so gently. A spark ran from his hand to hers and on to her heart. The butterflies fluttered more frantically, demanding freedom. She looked into his eyes.

He seemed to search hers. “My parents were never married, May.”

She focused on his words. “Oh?” She let her lips spread a bit.

“What a coincidence, neither were mine.”

He returned her smile with a real one. “Doesn’t sound too bad, once you say it out loud. Who’d guess we had that secret in common?”

“It gets worse for me.”

“How’s that?”

“It’s Chester. You see, he’s my brother. Truth be known, I’m nothing more than a runaway slave.” Had she really told him that? Had the words come out of her mouth?

He wasn’t hightailing it for the nearest sheriff. Would he hate her now?

He shook his head. “Not in my book, no ma’am, no way.”

“Well, by law, I should never have inherited Sea Side—it belonged to the commodore—or even any of my mother’s fortune, that by the way, I either mismanaged or gambled away.

“And if my pure white cousins were ever to learn the truth, that the commodore wasn’t my real father, then I’d owe all the coin I’ve earned scribbling love stories to them. And all the slaves I set free, including my brother, would belong to them as well.

“And so would I.”

Labeling Chester as kin caused an unexpected thrill in her chest.

“I for sure will not breathe a word to anyone, especially your brother.” He patted her hand. “Your secret is safe with me.”

“And there’s something else I want to tell you.” She gasped at her own words and pulled her hand from his to stay her wildly beating heart. “I don’t know why... Can’t imagine what... Something has definitely come over me.” She searched his eyes. “Have you cast some spell?”

He laughed. “No, ma’am. Never. I suppose you’ve needed, deep in your heart, to stop lying about who you really are and let the light in.”

She smiled, encouraged and emboldened by his understanding.
“Well, actually, two things.”

Chapter



Thirteen

What had she done? May jumped to her feet and walked toward the water. What was she doing?

“May.”

She turned around, and he wore the cutest little boy grin she’d ever seen on a grown man. She wanted to scoop him up and tousle his hair—or worse. Though she barely knew the man, she’d gone and let him into that darkest place where even she and Chester didn’t go, never talked about.

“Who are you, Henry Buckmeyer? How can you be doing this to me? I want to tell you my whole life, and I’ve never wanted to do that before. Not to anyone.”

He stepped closer, but stayed back a respectable distance. “I’m...” He closed his eyes, and his lips thinned into a serious expression as though he was about to bear his soul.

“I’m a man who thought his life was over. I lost my love, and never expected I’d find another.” He filled his lungs.

“May, when you walked into the Donoho’s dining room, I couldn’t believe it. I’ve carried such a wound in my heart that had scarred over, but still ached sorely. At the mere sight of you, it vanished, suddenly healed.”

He eased closer and held his hand out. “Does that make sense? I know I’m old enough to be your father, but...”

She took his hand, smiling. “No, you are not. Where in the world did you get that idea? How old do you think I am?”

He leaned back a bit and grimaced like she might throw something at him if he got it wrong. “Thirty-three.”

She laughed. “Goodness gracious. You are so kind, but no, I’m forty-one. And how old are you?”

“Well then. That isn’t so bad. I’m fifty-two. I thought I was being a silly old man thinking of cradle robbing.”

“Hardly.” She pulled him back to the bench. “I certainly was not planning on telling you my age, but I guess as long as you know my secrets, you might as well know that, too. And probably my real

name.”

“You’re not May Meriwether? It’s a pseudonym?”

“No. Well, yes. But May is my middle name.” She wiggled her pointer finger. “First you have to promise you’ll never use it. Without your word, I’ll never tell.”

“I promise.”

“Lean over so I can whisper it in your ear this one time.” She cupped her hands and whispered. “Millicent.”

He leaned back and stared at her. “Mercy, that’s a beautiful name.”

“Think about it. Millie May?”

He laughed. “Same reason I go by Henry—my middle name. Patrick’s fine, but I hate Patty, and....” He pointed his finger at her. “Actually, it was your and Chester’s daddy who started calling me that. Referred to me as Patty Boy or Patty Cake. Silas loved teasing me.”

She nodded. “He got that from the commodore, the man was... well...at times cruel. And that isn’t a strong enough word.”

“Who is the commodore?”

“The man I thought was my father, but in reality? My grandfather.” She heard the words coming out of her mouth, but if some idiot would have wagered that she’d come to Texas and bare her soul to a complete stranger, she would have given the man ten-thousand-to-one odds.

She looked away. This was just not right. He would break her heart like every other smooth-talking, good-looking fellow who came down the road. Once he got to know the real her, he....

“May?”

She turned back. “What?” The tone in her voice shocked her. Was she trying to pick a fight?

“I’m sorry he hurt you so bad; if I’d been there, I would have stopped him.”

She snorted a little chuckle. “No, you’d have been nineteen, a mere child, and he was the most....” She closed her eyes and gritted her teeth.

Oh, how she hated talking about him, thinking about him. What a horrible tangled mess he made of her life.

Henry stepped closer and took her hands. “Look at me.”

She raised her eyes.

“Yes, I would have.”

“You can’t say that.”

“When I was fifteen, I beat a man to death with my bare hands. I’ve killed ten men that I know of. The last one, only a year ago; some no good renegades tried to steal Rose and Charley. Levi and Wallace

were gone.”

Though nodding, he steeled his tone to a hardness she'd never heard come out of another man's mouth before. “Nothing—and I mean absolutely nothing—will ever hurt you again as long as you are with me.”

A chill ran up her spine, swirled around her heart, then settled over her like a warm blanket on a cool night. How did he know? Did he know? Was he some backwoods shaman, or had Chester spilled his guts?

Total lack of discernment around this man worried her; she always kept her wits about her in the past.

“You just never stop. Amazing me, that is. Who are you, Henry? How is it that I believe every word that comes out of your mouth?”

“It isn't me, sweet May. The Lord saved me and helped me to become the man I am. It's by His Divine Providence that you came all the way to Texas. He brought you into my life.”

She shook her head. “No, please don't say that. It can't be true.”

Backing away made no sense when she wanted the man more than any other she'd ever known. But why had he brought his religion into the mix? Her heart thundered in her chest.

How could she ever love someone who believed in a fictitious man-upstairs who took credit for everything the man did? A single tear made its way down her cheek. She turned back and met his eyes.

“Please keep my secrets.”

“Of course.”

She nodded then turned and ran toward the house.



Henry wanted to run after her, but his feet refused to obey his heart.

“Oh, Lord, soften her heart toward You.”

Tears flooded, but he blinked them away. He'd waited years for the right time with Sue. With May, he'd wait how ever long it took, but of one thing, he had no doubts in his heart of hearts.

Millicent May Meriwether would one day be his wife. His second—and last—soul mate.

“Thank you, Lord, for bringing her to me.”



The barn came into view, and May slowed to a fast walk. Sweat stung her eyes. She was positive the dress was ruined. How could anyone live in this heat? She stopped.

The little girl in her, the one who always ran away anytime a man got too close, wanted to keep going, find Chester, and have him take her all the way back to New York.

But she didn't run, she turned around. What she wanted—really wanted—strolled toward her. Of their own, her feet put one in front of the other. Then another urge almost overwhelmed, well, the same but different.

That time, she wanted to run toward him, embrace him, and let him hold her and keep her safe forever like he promised. It was almost more than she could bear, but the little girl wouldn't have it.

She found a spot ten paces from him and anchored. "So, you're not perfect after all."

"Never claimed to be."

"Besides being a murderer, what else should I know about you?" He stepped closer. She held her hands up. "Please don't."

He laughed. "Fine, I'll stay right here. Now let me see." He held his hands out and gave her a little shrug. "I speak my mind at times when I shouldn't, but you saw that Sunday."

"And well, Mary Rachel thinks I spoil the babies, but I treat them the same as I treated her and Rebecca. Those two grew up to be wonderful young ladies." He shook his head. "I learned a long time ago to be true to myself. I've been working on my faults forever."

She simply loved being around him. A peace settled over her soul. How was that possible? Almost as if his strength radiated from him.

"You are for real, aren't you?" She wiped her brow and glanced at the sun in the azure blue sky then came back to those same color eyes.

"Am I really standing here in this Texas heat?"

"Yes, ma'am." He held his hand out. "Touch me. You'll see I'm real."

She shook her head. She dared not. "Awhile ago, I said there's two things I needed to tell you."

"Yes, your real name and age; was there something else?"

She backed away a step. It took all the little girl in her to keep from throwing herself into his arms. "Yes, I'm afraid so. Except, well, uh, it isn't a bad thing, quite the contrary, but, uh, I might as well just say it. I'm a virgin, Henry."

His lips spread into a grin so wide she wasn't sure his cheeks could stand it. "Not a bad thing? Why, that's a wonderful thing, that's excellent. I thought it was something horrible."

"Well, I am a bit of a horrible shrew, too, stubborn and cantankerous, demanding, spoiled—although that isn't entirely my fault. Just ask Chester. He's been the only man who could put up with me over all these years."

She tore her eyes from his and stared at the ground. "I'm most

assuredly not a prize. I know that.” She shook her head and looked back up. “What do you see in me, Henry?”

“You’re so wonderful that even if you’ve killed a hundred men, whoever knows you would know you had a good reason and were innocent of murder. Otherwise, you’d be in jail, right?”

“Long story. Care to join me? Mosey on back to the bench, and its shade to hear it? This sun is liable to cook us both.” He took off his hat and wiped his forehead with his sleeve. “Believe me, you’re perfectly safe with me. Holding your hand is as much as I will allow.” He offered his.

Could it be true? Everything seemed so right, her heart so safe in the man’s presence. She stepped closer and slipped hers into his then strolled back to the bench by his side.

The luxury of the pine’s shade offered at least fifteen degrees off the scorching temperature. She sat. “So you’ve killed ten men, but I know you’re not a murderer.”

“That’s right. The first one was on my fifteenth birthday. Like the fool I was back then, I slipped off to the local pub to celebrate with a couple of jars of beer. Two lumberjacks who knew about me and my mother came in.”

He shrugged. “The man started in on me, being loud and obnoxious. Saying he was my father, and wouldn’t shut his mouth.

“I tried to leave but he caught me at the door and slapped the back of my head. I told him to not hit me again, and he slapped my face.” Henry filled his lungs then let it out slow as though trying to exhale the memory.

“I hit him then kept on pounding my fist into his face. Even after his buddy jumped in, I wouldn’t or couldn’t stop. The judge ruled self defense. Even the other loggers knew the man was trouble and didn’t make a fuss. Anyway, that was the first.”

“The guy was a grown man?”

He nodded. “I was always big for my age.”

“I agree, self defense. What about the other nine?” She needed to write this down. Mary Rachel was absolutely right. May should tell Henry’s and Sue story first.

“Mother hated what happened, blamed herself for me killing that guy, so she took a teaching job in New Orleans. On the way there –” He smiled. “The few times I’ve told this story, I raise my shirt and show my scar, but other than Sue, you’re the first lady to hear this, so you’ll have to trust me.

Anyway, these two bandits jumped us on the trail. I got cut real bad, but still managed to kill the other guy with his partner’s knife.”

“What about the man who cut you?”

“Mother shot him.”

“Self defense again, no doubt. The others?”

“Five in 1814, the Battle of New Orleans, a Mexican soldier at San Jancinto, and then last year, two of the renegades Bold Eagle sent.” He smiled. “So you see?”

“Well those can’t count.”

“I’m not a murder, and you, for sure, dear lady, are not a shrew. You’re beautiful inside and out. It oozes from you. When you walk, a regal-ness pours out. When you talk.... Other than Sue, I’ve never known a stronger or more desirable lady than you, my sweet May.”

If not for the detestable temperature, she would swear she must be dreaming, but she could never imagine this much heat. Had he called her his own? She loved hearing him say she was not a shrew, but of course, he hadn’t seen her at her worst.

But calling her desirable and.... “What about this nose, wide as a house? And my kinky hair?” She fussed with a curl. “How could you really think I’m beautiful?”

“That’s easy. It all fits. Your nose, your hair, the whole you comes together perfectly. You’ve got the most kissable lips I’ve ever laid eyes on.”

“Don’t talk like that, Henry. I’m having enough trouble not throwing myself at you.”

He smiled. “I’d catch you, but that’s all that would happen. I believe in marriage before enjoying any of a woman’s intimate pleasures.”

She looked away. How could being married to him work? The very idea of waking up each morning nestled to him—for the rest of her life—being Mis’ess Patrick Henry Buckmeyer certainly took her breath away.

A truly intriguing proposal, but he hadn’t proposed.

She glanced back and held his eyes with her own.

“Might you consider moving?”

Chapter



Fourteen

“Well actually, I have.” Henry stood and stepped around to the back of the bench, thankful she hadn’t tested his resolve and thrown herself at him. But the Lord had promised the devil couldn’t tempt him beyond what he could endure.

A splash drew his gaze to the water. A ripple circled out from a spot a stone’s throw from the shore.

“There’s a fantastic place along the Llano River that Levi and I found. That’s where he and Wallace have been the past month. They’re staking out the corners to our new ranch,

“We used our last four headrights on it. I’ve been thinking about moving for a while now.”

“That’s sixteen thousand acres?”

“A little more, but yes.”

“So where’s the Llano River? I haven’t heard of it. May I assume that it’s still in Texas?”

He looked back. Was this God, or was he crazy? How could he live the rest of his life without her? “Yes, ma’am, south and west from here. Not more than a month.”

“I thought we had an understanding, Mr. Buckmeyer.” She wiggled her index finger like a metronome. “No more ma’ams. So, how about New York? Ever thought about going east?”

“Being polite is a bad habit of mine.” He grinned. “I would like to travel some, but getting my clan anywhere is a chore.”



If Sunday was a harbinger, travel with him might be a challenge. She loved New York, but it wouldn’t be the same again if Henry wasn’t there. Her hand went to her tummy; best to ask him now before things got any more serious.

“There’s something else I need to know.”

He slipped back around and sat on his end of the bench. “You can ask me anything.”

She filled her lungs and held her breath for a second, then blew it

out real slow. Could all this really be happening? Was it truly possible he was the one she'd waited her whole life for?

"I know it's personal, but I need to know. How do you feel about having another baby?"

He smiled. "With you?"

"Yes, me."

"Boy or girl?"

"How can I know, and what does that matter anyway? If you get the wrong one, you can't send it back." She swatted at him. "Now be serious. I've wanted to be a mother as long as I can remember."

Leaning toward him, she grinned. "Did Houston tell you he thought I was an angel? He climbed into my lap and wanted to feel my wings."

"No, but I can sure see where he'd get the idea."

"Anyway, he snuggled in and took himself a little nap. I've never held a sleeping child like that." She closed her eyes. "It was wonderful."

She looked at him again. "The only way it could have been better, was if I'd given birth to him myself. Your children are precious and..." Tears welled. "I'd love them, certainly. I'm sorry...it's just..I've waited so long."

"Too, Long, May."

"May be. And well, there's been so many men who have.... Well, I do hate you hairy brutes at times. And Henry, are you still in love with Sue?"

He extended his hand, and she slipped hers into it. "My babies' mother will always have a special place in my heart, but no. I've mourned my dead. I'm not still in love with her. Did you know she was married before me?"

She sniffed then nodded. "Mary Rachel had mentioned that. So answer my question. Do you want more babies?"

"Can I spoil him?"

"Yes, of course, and if it's a girl?"

He held up his fist extending and crooking his smallest digit. "She'll have me wrapped right around her tiny little finger, just like all the other Buckmeyer ladies."

"So answer my question. Are you willing to do your duty if lightning did strike, and we married?"

"Is that a proposal?"

"No. It is most certainly not." She stood and put her hands on her hips. How could he say that? She would never propose to any man. It wasn't her place! How did he turn things around on her so easily?

He was the one supposed to propose, not her. She wanted to slap him. She wanted to run. But she wouldn't. Not this time. She faced

him. "Answer my question. Yes? Or no?"

"I love babies." He nodded once then studied the ground more than a minute. "You do know that complications from childbirth is how Sue –"

"Yes, I do."

He smiled. "The little darlings are remarkable. Would one be enough?" He grinned, but not a wide happy smile. Seemed forced, like even the thought of her giving birth was more than he could bear.

She sat back down, scooted closer, and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Yes, and I promise not to die."



Her hand on his shoulder sent little sparks all the way to his heart. Was he being a fool? Mixing up love and lust?

Oh, Lord, did you form May in her mother's womb just for me? Guide me, Father. Give me the right words at the right time.

The horrible image of her lying on her death bed cradling a baby vanished. She wasn't Sue, and he'd never be an idiot again. He'd not let her have one baby right after another, no matter how much she wanted to give him a son.

A baby girl would suit him just fine.

He stood and extended his hand. "Want to help me fire up the boiler? I promised the girls a bath."

She jumped to her feet, glee written across her face. "Yes, of course, as long as I get a turn. That would be wonderful."

He loved her smile. For sure, he hadn't found anything about her he didn't love. Except her not being punctual, but it seemed that was definitely a female trait.

Even Bonnie thought she had all the time in the world to get ready. "There's a condition."

"What? Please don't tell me I have to sing for my bath."

"No, but could you?"

"What?"

"Sing?"

"Yes, can't everyone?"

He laughed. "Best ask Rebecca about that."

"Fine, I will. Now what's that condition you mentioned? You can't not tell me, I hate not knowing something." She bumped his shoulder with hers. "And if there's one thing I really want to know is what I have to do to get a ticket to your bathhouse?"

"Well, the girls and I are going with Mammy and Jean Paul tonight. They're having church, but you don't have to go." He grinned. "A sponge bath isn't so bad."

“That’s blackmail.” She glanced at the sun. “Do we have time to get a bath then on to town?”

“We have a brush arbor down by the creek between the two farm fields up by the road. You’ll like the meetings there, I promise.”

“What’s different about them?”

He shrugged. “You’ll see.”



She hated that, having to wait, but knew well enough that strong men never explained themselves. That’s why her heroes were always well loved. The commodore told her that and broke her of the habit of asking him why.

Though she no longer denied herself the asking, she did remember what she’d learned and applied to the men starring in her novels. Many a reviewer had complimented her strong male characters.

“What exactly will I see?” She matched his stride, but he should slow down. “While I would love another bath—even a swim in that snake-infested lake of yours so long as Rebecca’s along—I was hoping to have some time with Levi and Wallace this evening.”

“I heard about that moccasin. She’s a great shot.” The man certainly had mastered ignoring questions, changing the topic of conversation.

“So?” She double stepped, turned, and faced him. “Are you going to tell me what’s different about Mammy’s brush arbor meeting or continue to avoid my question?”

“It isn’t necessary for you to keep your reasons from me just to protect your manliness. You see, I’m a writer, so am fully aware –”

“No preaching.”

She glanced over. “I was not preaching, I was merely –”

“No.” He chuckled. “I wasn’t accusing you of getting on your soap box. That’s what’s different. About tonight’s meeting. There’s no preaching, only singing.”

“Oh?” She contemplated this interesting fact. “I like that.”

“Thought you might.”

“Well, it’s just that your deacon was....” She stopped herself; she really didn’t want a theological discussion right then. “Anyway, no preaching. So what else is different?”

“We sing, pray, have a great time in the Lord. Someone might read a scripture or two, but there’s no prepared message like at the Methodist church on Sunday.”

“Some of the same hymns though?”

“Don’t know. We let the Spirit lead, but you can start any song you want, make one up or whatever. We don’t have any rules, and it’s

just us, so....” He smiled. “Want that bath or not?”

“If I do dip my big toe in your hot water, and then I change my mind, what happens then?”

“Nothing. I’d be disappointed, but that’s all.” He reached the steps of the bathhouse, but he went on around toward the back of the building. “Come on, you can split some wood for kindling. Ever swung an axe?”

She hadn’t, but there wasn’t much to it. After three swings, he claimed it to be enough to get the fire kindled. A wad of straw under the wood chips and shavings, one match, and in mere minutes a fire roared.

She never thought about it before. Chester always kept her fireplace blazing in cold weather, but.... “What do you do if you don’t have matches?”

He stuck another piece of wood under the boiler then looked at her. “Kept a flint in my kit, and if needed, I know how to string a bow and start a fire with a stick.”

“Interesting. I’ve not given it much thought until just now. You have to show me that method sometime for my Texas books.” She smiled. “I like to make them authentic.”

“Always a good idea. My girls would catch you for sure if you tried to sneak anything by.”

“I throw stones at my heroines, a cold wet night and no matches. Now that would be fascinating, especially if the man she had her eye on wasn’t around.”

She looked away and let her mind run free. “Or the man could be freshly mauled by a bear and delusional with a high fever. The wolves howled, and her dog ran away yelping.”

“Not my dog.”

She turned and faced him again. “She only has enough powder for one more shot.”

“Not my lady. Only an idiot goes off half-cocked.”

She pulled herself back to the now. “What’s not your dog?”

“Blue Dog, New Blue’s daddy, never ran from danger, ran straight to it. Another thing you need to ask Rebecca about—the time Blue saved her from the sow bear.”

May shook her head. She might not ever have to make up another story in her whole career. Seemed a lifetime of tales waited to be told right here in Red River County.

She resisted the urge to ask about his new dog or the mutt’s sire. “So how long before the water’s hot?”

“Not long.”

And it wasn’t, but then too soon, the wonderful rejuvenating bath was over, supper eaten, and no matter what excuse she imagined, in

the end, she had to pay the piper.

Except a part of her truly wanted to go, the part that wanted to be where he was, no matter where that might be. And she did love to sing. He'd said seven-fifteen.

She floated downstairs and off the last step with three minutes to spare.

Of course he waited, but wore a broad grin—the one she almost loved as much as his little boy smile. He extended his elbow. “You’re early, I like that.”

She took his arm and let him lead her outside. But instead of the parade she expected, one wagon waited with two mules harnessed to it. “Where’s everyone else?”

“Girls all went early to help get everything ready.” He offered his hand and she climbed up to the bench seat. “Last I saw, the boys were headed south. Full moon tonight and a rising barometer.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Hey, Dex.” Walking around front, he patted a mule’s nose. “Plenty of light and a clear sky is perfect for varmint hunting. Charlie cashed in some of his IOUs.”

“Interesting. And why not take the carriage?”

“They took The Black. Figured some of the girls could ride home with us so everyone wouldn’t be so crowded.” He stepped up into the seat and took the reins in hand. “You don’t object to riding alone with me, do you?”

“Oh no, not at all.”

He flicked the leather over the team’s backs and off they went with a jerky start. She grabbed hold of his arm to steady herself, then didn’t let go. She liked it that she didn’t have to be so careful to protect her reputation out here in Texas.

No one would see them, and no one probably cared, well, maybe except for that Lizbeth creature.

She wondered if she’d rather be heading south instead of to her second church meeting of the week. Did it matter so long as she sat by this man? Hunting really wasn’t her bailiwick, but singing, not so bad.

Besides, he’d said no rules, so it might be intriguing to discover exactly what that meant.

Just as the sun sank behind the treeline, and the golden sunlight painted the bottoms of the clouds in brilliant gold, pink, and purple hues, several voices warming up in a beautiful deep harmony rode on the breeze. “We must be getting close.”

“Yes, ma’am. You’re going to enjoy this.” He smiled and after pulling around a row of huge cedars, a smattering of wagons and a string of horses came into view. Not near as many as on Sunday, but certainly more than she anticipated.

He tethered the team, came around to her, then offered his hand. Accepting it gladly, she stepped down then took his arm. He couldn't imagine how much she loved walking on his arm, how it made her feel.

She poked him with her inside elbow. "I thought you said it was only us."

"Few of the neighbors show up sometimes. Never can tell."

With him, no place could be distasteful, and on his arm, she was a queen, so she didn't care. If only he would be her king. She could even stand church twice a week as long as she always got to walk in on his arm.

It just wasn't logical that a man so strong in so many other areas needed such a crutch. If a God existed out there somewhere, He wouldn't be interested in the likes of these few country folks gathering mid-week.

He led her into a clearing. The building had no walls. What a surprise. Coal oil lamps hung on every other post and glowed cheerily against the shadows of dusk.

Four men stood on a small stage of sorts and continued tuning their fine harmonies. The simple beauty of the meeting place set against the backdrop of a painted sunset took her breath away.

"It's so lovely. I never thought there would be no walls."

"It's a brush arbor, nothing fancy, cooler in the summer, but you have to bundle up in the winter."

People moseyed around rows of planks made into seats balanced between stumps under the primitive thatched roof. It surprised her that the majority were Negroes.

But almost as many whites ambled about and visited like they were all best of friends. Why couldn't it be such in Virginian society?

Henry led her to two rocking chairs and waited until she sat in the one offered. Had it, too, been Sue's? Mammy, sitting on the front plank row visiting with Chester, glanced over and nodded at Henry.

May just hated that unflattering, old black slave granny moniker being hung on Chester's new interest—although she did have the figure for it. But what could May possibly do about it?

She'd have to mull it over.

Mammy stepped onto a little box then on up to the stage area where the quartet quietened. "Alright now, everyone, if y'all'll be so kind as to find yourself a seat, we'll get started."

The last few milling around found a perch. May glanced at Chester. To her amazement, he smiled and winked. She'd not seen him so happy in forever.

"For those of you who don't know, Mister Henry's put the word out to his many contacts that he wants to buy a slave with a peculiar

birthmark on his neck.

“One who goes by the name of Big Hoss, last we heard. Well, he’s my brother, and the Lord just laid it on my heart that we need to pray that Mister Henry’s efforts are fruitful.”

May slapped her hand over Henry’s and squeezed. She smiled then leaned toward him and whispered, “That’s so wonderful.”

“So if every one of you will seek the Lord in your own way a few minutes, why, we’ll give God praise and consider it done! Hallelujah!” Mammy went and sat back down next to Chester.

Everyone bowed, so May ducked her chin, too, but peeked. Most everyone’s eyes closed, including Henry’s, and their lips moved. She took to studying her fingernails.

A tiny speck of ink stained the cuticle of her ring finger. It had survived even her bath.

She hated being dirty and curled the offending digit into her palm. How could it have happened? Covering it with the others, she looked around but it didn’t seem anyone had noticed.

Moving it to her mouth, she started licking frantically trying to get it off before the prayer was over.

Someone clapped their hands right behind her and jumped up. She jumped too, but remained seated in her chair. Her heart only missed a couple of beats. A man burst into song, telling Godly men to rejoice and be merry. To sing praises to the Lord.

Fast paced, his rich tenor filled the air. He seemed to make the words up as he went along; they didn’t all rhyme like on Sunday.

“Raise your voices in song to Him Who rides upon the clouds!”

They thought God rode the clouds? She’d never heard that. Second time he sang it from beginning to end, other folks joined in. May loved the joyful tune and picked up on the chorus the third time through.

Even clapped; everyone else was. Henry, too, but he had to be only mouthing the words, because she could not hear anything coming out. And she sat right there next to the man.

That song ended and another started right on its heels, then another. Before she knew it, she was on her feet, clapping and singing and truly enjoying herself.

Whenever she glanced at Henry, he smiled even bigger. Chester, too. Made her happy her having fun made them happy. Why, everyone seemed to enjoy it as much as she did.

The sky darkened and the lamps brightened. Ten or fifteen songs later, it ended. She wouldn’t have minded it going even longer.

That night while May stretched out in Mary Rachel’s feather bed hoping for a breeze, she relived the day’s events.

So much was said.

So much had happened.
Was she being a fool?

Chapter



Fifteen

Henry sipped his hot toddy and debated whether to wait on the front porch for his babies to get home or go find them. But Levi and Wallace were capable of taking care of themselves and his boys.

And New Blue had gone along with them.

Hopefully, they'd gotten into that big family of coons that'd been raiding the corn crib, or.... He waved the raccoons off. What an old worry wart. His boys were fine, out there having a good time.

Anyway, it wasn't even that late—yet. Standing, he walked to the porch's edge then took the steps down into the yard. Moonlight bathed the land, and a light fog hovered low on the pastures below.

Turning his attention to the upstairs window on the corner, he contemplated his houseguest. May. Short and sweet, but mercy, Millicent was such a beautiful name, had a soft rhythm to it, like her walk.

If he promised to challenge anyone who dared call her Millie May to a duel, would she let him call her by her first name? The light went out in the window.

He sighed. He didn't want any duels, he was tired of fighting. He'd killed enough men.

Mercy, Lord, why did he have to keep taking lives?

He wandered out to the pump and got himself a cool drink. On his way back, he studied the darkened window. Was she looking out at him or already asleep?

What would a life be like with the novelist by his side? He'd never met another woman who could even come close to comparing with Sue.

The picture of his Susannah facing down that storm ran across his mind's eye. Then immediately, the first time May walked into the Donoho followed. He stifled a chuckle.

Sure wouldn't want to get those two into the same room together, but no doubt it would be interesting.

The image of her strolling across the dining room toward his table awed him; and all those men blocking him from seeing her every sway

annoyed him. Why, she danced when she walked.

Her rhythm and grace moved him at his core. He might not be able to sing a lick, but his mother saw to it that he learned to dance. What would it be like to twirl across the floor with the dark beauty in his arms?

He climbed the porch stairs and sat back in his rocker. One thing he knew for certain. He would never unequally yoke himself, not because of being superstitious, like Sue thinking God would punish her.

He wouldn't do it because scripture clearly said not to. Didn't want to meet his Maker and explain going against His word.

Was he being a fool thinking of a life with Millicent May Meriwether?



She sat up in bed with a song on her lips. That had never happened before in her life. Had she been singing in her sleep? How strange.

Shortly, she found herself in Mammy's kitchen sitting next to Chester sipping hot coffee lightened with fresh cream and sweetened with a dab of molasses.

She'd hoped to find the cook alone and could barely wait for the opportunity to visit with her. An idea had struck that May hoped Mammy might like. And that woman!

Went and set a plate with two of those horribly delicious cookies on the table right in front of her. Oh, she would be big as one of Henry's mules when she went home if she didn't quit eating so much.

The thought of leaving, going back to the big city, hit her in the gut and sent a wave of nausea up into her chest. Who would ever want to leave this place? She took a bite and the sweetness melted on her tongue.

With her spoon, she lightly tapped the back of Chester's hand. "Shouldn't you be working on your edits?"

"Why, no, ma'am. That's all taken care of."

"Really? How'd you finish so quickly?"

"Miss Rebecca and Mis'ess Rose begged me hard to allow them to handle that chore. Wouldn't let up until I agreed they could edit Miss Mary Rachel's copy.

"I suspect they wanted to read your new novel most of all, but both of them assured me they had sharp eyes and promised not to get lost in the story."

"Aren't you anxious to get this manuscript off so you can start negotiations on the next one?"

“It shouldn’t take long, not with both of them on it.” He stretched back and rolled his shoulders. “I’ve been thinking we might shop the next one around a bit, get ourselves a better deal.

“I’d like to include the first chapter of the new book.” He glanced back to Mammy. “Everyone’s going to love her Lone Star novels.”

“But, Chester! I don’t want to be disloyal. We’ve done every book with –”

He patted her forearm then smiled. “Easy, we’ll give them first and last bid for sure. And if you’ll get to writing, we’ll send them first peek at your Texas Romance series. Don’t you like that name? Or what about The Republic Romances?”

“I like the alliteration, but with Texas a state already, Republic would date the series. It’s definitely a fascinating place. So where do you think I should start?”

Mammy turned around from her pot on the stove. “Oh, child, like all the girls said, you have to begin at the beginning, and that means with Mister Henry and Miss Sue falling in love.”

May swallowed the last of her coffee. Could she stand it?

Then a wonderful idea smacked her between the eyes. She’d put her own name down every time and then get Mary Rachel to replace it with her mother’s when she transcribed it.

What was she thinking? That would never work.

No way could she ever plant and harvest cotton or rear a little boy and baby girl out on this wild prairie all alone. How lonely it must have been. Why, without Chester, she couldn’t even take good care of herself in the lap of luxury.

How did Sue ever do it? And for ten long years until she finally met Henry. Sure was easy to see how she fell so deeply in love with him.

But May might as well face the facts.

Henry’s first wife was amazing, and never ever could May ever compare—in any way. So she might as well forget.... Still, the man had certainly encouraged her.

Dare she hope something serious could develop between them? Perhaps she should write the story.

Well, what she needed to do was talk to Henry, in private. It could be fun for her readers to meet Levi as a young boy, before he became the famous Texas Ranger.

“Has anyone seen Henry this morning?”

“He should be getting back, left out after the second cock’s crow this morning.”

After replenishing her cup, she found him in the barn, polishing the shimmering coat of that magnificent black stallion. “Good morning.”

"Yes, it is." He nodded toward her hand. "Bring me one of those?"

"No. I didn't even –" Now why hadn't she thought of that? "I mean I wasn't sure you'd be –" She held out her half full cup of coffee. "Here, have the rest of mine, it's still pretty hot."

He looked over his nose into the cup. "No thanks. I drink mine hot and straight up. What have you got in there, anyway?"

"Cream and molasses, Mammy made it. Tastes delightful, you should try it."

"Oh, I have, but I prefer black."

"So, where've you been?"

"Looking for sign. New Blue and I go every morning."

"Every morning?"

"Yes, ma'am. I let them sneak up on us once, but never again."

"Who?"

"Band of renegades, came to grab Rose and Charlie and take them back to Bold Eagle."

"But I thought the Major and Captain tracked that Comanche chief down and brought him to justice. That's what the newspaper said."

"Yes, ma'am, they did. Of the ones who came here, we only killed five, at least two escaped. Both wounded. That makes it a blood feud." As though looking into the future, he gazed out the barn's open end. "I'll never let my guard down again."

"They came here? To your home? Seven of them?"

"Yes, they came while Levi and Wallace were away fighting the war with Mexico."

"You told me you killed two. Who shot the others?"

"Jean Paul and Rebecca." He pulled his lips back like he hated thinking about it. "And Charley shot one."

"Oh dear, poor baby." She should be terrified at the prospect that savages might be out there somewhere, waiting to kill them all, but she wasn't. Not even the least bit concerned.

How did Henry do it? Make her feel so safe?

She stepped a bit closer, like he was a stove and she, chilly, needed to soak up some of his warmth, his safety, his strength.

But the realist in her, that part that kept nagging at her to get her business done and get herself and Chester out of Texas, that person led her back to her original intent.

"I want to ask you something. Chester and the girls are campaigning for me to write your and Sue's love story. They're saying Levi and Rose should come second. What's your opinion?"

"Well." He leaned against the horse and shrugged. "That's pretty much where it all started, that day at the Sulphur Fork Trading Post when that scoundrel tried to bilk Susannah out of her cotton."

He laughed. "I did my best to get an answer out of Elaine Dawson,

she was Sue's best friend, on how she talked her into asking me to go with her.

"That moment in time changed Sue's life—and mine. Elaine always claimed the Lord orchestrated the whole thing. She'd been praying for Sue—not that she'd marry me."

He winked. "Back then I had a bad reputation."

"What? How could that be? Why?"

The Black stomped the ground, like the animal couldn't believe it either.

"Your daddy had a big part in it."

She grinned. "Truly? How? What did he do?"

Henry opened a stall gate, and the stallion walked in then turned around to let the man take off his bridle. He flipped a latch then launched into his story about celebrating Andrew Jackson's presidential victory with too much of her father's rot gut.

Once finished, he shrugged. "Anyway, Mother wasn't one to defend herself—or me—so the gossip mongers ran amuck. I didn't much care."

She could listen to him all day. And not just for the tone of his voice. A natural storyteller, he convinced her she needed to tell his tale, but could she?

Blowing out all her breath, she caught his arm as he reached for a hay fork. He turned back.

"Which one of your daughters is most like her mother?"

"They're all pretty much like Sue. Rebecca, maybe? She's got her hair, but she never had her mother's hot temper. Oh mercy, my Sue had a passion about most everything.

"Mary Rachel does, too. She gets pretty riled on occasion. Like she loves butting heads. Cecelia jumps to conclusions something awful like her mama."

"Who? Cecelia? Oh, the one they call CeCe."

"Yes, ma'am, the fourteen-year-old." He cocked his head and raised his brows. Would he ever quit showing her different expressions? So far, she loved every one. "Yes, that's right, fourteen in April. Bonnie hung that nickname on her."

"What about her, your baby girl?"

"Bonnie Claire. She might be the most like me." He tossed a forkful of hay over the stall wall to the horse. "She was only two when her mama went to Heaven. I loved on her as much as possible."

"You never say Sue died, Henry. Always that she passed or crossed over, went home to the Lord. Have you accepted her death?"

He stared at her.

"I'm sorry, please forgive me. That was much too personal. It's none of my business. I shouldn't have —"

“She isn’t dead, May. Only her body died. Sue’s in Heaven.”

Oh, dear gracious, she shouldn’t have asked, should have known. Poor man, he couldn’t accept his wife’s demise and didn’t even know it.

What an ignorant superstition that caused a person to believe a soul lives on. And what a contradiction; he was so intelligent in other areas.

“I see.” But May lied, she really didn’t see, not at all. “Here’s what I don’t know. If I can write this story, I want to, but....”

“Why couldn’t you?”

“I’m not certain if I can stand you and Sue being together again.” She stared at the ground. “You giving your heart to her.”

“Are you jealous, May?”

Her cheeks warmed. She looked him square in the eye. “That’s a silly question. Of course I’m jealous! I hated it when legally single Lizbeth put her hand on you. And I loved it when you removed it.”

“But, May –”

“Of course, I am. You call her ‘my Sue’. What woman wouldn’t be?”

“But she’s gone. It’s been six years now. What’s there to be jealous of?”

“That’s my whole point. If I write your story, with her, I guarantee I’ll bring her back to life—at least on the page. Certainly in my mind. I could end up hating her, and I don’t want to.”

Tears welled. He’d think she was a crybaby. She tried to blink them away.

He threw up both palms out toward her. “Hold it. That Henry and that Sue have nothing to do with you and me. What happened then has no bearing on us today.

“If you want to write about Levi, then I think you need to start with Sue and me.” He reached out and wiped both her cheeks. He had such a light touch. “She’s a part of me. She’ll always be my babies’ mother, but she’s gone.”

He took her hand. “I fulfilled my vow, ‘til death do us part. And if you and I ever walk the aisle, I’ll fulfill my vow to you.”

She wanted to believe him. He said just the right things, and it all sounded so good and right. “How can you say that?”

“May, listen. Even at the funeral, the unattached women let me know in various and sundry ways, that they wanted me to come courting’, but I wasn’t interested.”

“At the funeral?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“That’s deplorable.”

“I thought so. Over the years, I’ve given it some thought. For sure,

I don't like sleeping by myself. But not a one of them came close to my Sue. No one had, not until I laid eyes on you."

She adored his declarations as much as the sound of his voice. Both soothed her soul. If he wasn't for real, could she just live forever in the fantasy she'd discovered in Texas?

Maybe she needed to hear the whole story from him—start to finish—and bring his dead wife back to life. Perhaps then she could see for herself whether he was truly over Sue or not.

But what if he wasn't? She'd hate it, but she had to know.

She nodded. "All right then. You and the girls have convinced me. But I want to hear it all from you. When and where would you care to start?"

"Right now? In the library?"

"You have a library?"

"Yes, ma'am. I didn't build this place for Sue alone."



Henry waved her away. "Go get your pen and ink. I'll meet you in the entry hall in, say, fifteen minutes?"

"That'll do." She turned and walked back toward the house.

He watched her until she disappeared outside the barn's mid door, enjoying every step and the way her skirt swung side to side like the pendulum on the grandfather clock he had shipped from London.

He missed having a woman who belonged to him. Oh, he had the girls—his daughters, Rose, Laura, and Mammy—but he wanted a wife. He wanted Millicent May Meriwether.

He tossed one more forkful of hay then hurried to his library. Immediately went to grabbling newspapers and straightening his desk. Good thing the girls took turns sneaking in and cleaning for him even though the room was off limits.

Once satisfied, he scooted out to the bottom of the stairs. He pulled his pocket watch out and flipped it open. He hadn't marked the time, but it sure seemed like more than fifteen minutes already.

Petticoats rustled. He stepped back and watched her float down the stairs. Houston was right. She could be an angel. Maybe her crinoline holding her skirt so far out made her seem to move like a cloud. Whatever it was, he loved it.

Taking her valise, he extended his elbow. She looped her hand through and laid it on his arm. That was where she belonged. At his side, leaning on him, counting on him.

He escorted her down the hall into his inner sanctum. The desire to usher her all the way through the final door was overwhelming, but he wouldn't. Couldn't. He wanted her as his forever soul mate, not a temporary tryst.

She glanced at the closed door. "Where does that lead?"

"My bedroom."

She strolled back toward the open door that lead to the hall and put her hand on the knob.

"Don't."

She twirled and faced him. "Why not? I prefer it to be quiet when I work." She smiled as demurely as he'd ever seen. "Your abode, dear man, gets pretty loud at times."

"But." He smiled. "We must abstain from all appearances of impropriety."

Chapter



Sixteen

May appreciated his honor and integrity.

He pointed to the desk chair and nodded. "Sit there, I'll take the wingback."

She eased into his chair. Fit her fine, almost as well as her own back home. He plopped down on the plush chair across from the desk. With paper straightened, inkwell opened, and feather-tickled chin, she looked up and smiled. "I'm ready. Sure hope this is the right thing to do."

"It is."

She wished she shared his confidence, but wasn't nearly as certain. Especially since she'd already told him too much, the secrets of her heart and experience—or lack thereof—things Chester didn't even know.

Did she truly want to hear all the intimate details of his life with Sue?

He commenced his telling. Jotting down key phrases and ideas, she mostly committed the word pictures he painted to memory. After what seemed like an hour or better, he finally got to Sue showing up.

The man certainly chased a lot of rabbits and gave her way too much detail and back story. Heading off again on a trapping story, he paused, and she stopped him.

"Wait. So there you are at your cabin, your mother's been gone three months, and you're washing bois d'arc seeds and curing your hides, minding your own business when Sue rides into your life.

"I love Rebecca's name for your fortune. Hiding it in your honey was genius. Exactly how much honey money and jewels had you stashed in those jars?"

"I don't know. I kept buying mother jewelry, but she'd never wear it. We'd both been saving gold coin forever." He waved his hand around the room. "The foundation for all this. Could've been ten thousand, maybe more." He shrugged. "I don't know, never counted."

"Interesting." So well off he didn't know how much money he had. The Wall Street crowd would have a conniption fit. "Please, do

go on.”

And continue he did, right up to dinner, the most excellent gumbo she'd ever eaten. Mammy also served a delicious potato soup—May only took a taste—to the little ones who didn't want the spicy New Orleans fare.

The cook credited the fresh cream and home grown potatoes, but that wasn't enough. May couldn't distinguish the individual spices, but that woman sure could meld flavors.

Chunks of ham, corn, okra, onion, those heavenly tomatoes, and May wasn't sure what all else, swam in the gumbo. The zest didn't hit you until after you swallowed, then it burned good all the way down.

A second bowl couldn't be resisted, but only half full. And the cornbread should have been called cake and eaten for dessert. Though she'd have liked three squares, she limited herself to two.

Mammy's cooking was downright dangerous. Where would May get more clothes? Her next royalty check might have to go to Laura for sewing. Her dresses would certainly not fit by the time she left.

She stood and dabbed the corners of her mouth. She didn't want to leave Texas—not anymore, not ever, unless Henry went with her.

“Thank you so much for that delicious meal.”

“You're welcome, Baby child.”

“I know I keep saying it, but I enjoyed it immensely.” She went to the woman and hugged her shoulders, cheek to cheek. “You're an amazing cook.”

Chester beamed and nodded.

Henry rose. “Let's take a break and watch my babies play a while.”

“Fine with me.”

He moved her to the porch where he offered her Sue's rocker and sat in his. May rocked until the time came for the older children to get back to their lessons and the little ones to their naps.

Then he ushered her to the library and continued. Telling most of his stories, he spoke so matter-of-factly, almost like he told someone else's tale.

Funny, it didn't bother her at all like she thought it would.

He even had May right there and laughing along. “The timing was perfect. Levi and Titus leading that team of mules out, and Sue fit to be tied, thinking I'd traded away her cotton.”

He slapped his knee and wiped the corner of his eye. “Course, once she found out what I'd done, she couldn't apologize enough. Bless her heart.”

May couldn't help it and tried to catch her breath, still giggling. “Indeed. My gracious, four mules and the harness. Had to set you back a pretty penny. What'd they cost you?”

Even though the story was funny, she had to admit—even if only to herself—that hearing it wasn't always easy. She didn't particularly care for the happy gleam in his eye and mirth in his voice at the Titus Trading Post remembrance.

And still, she couldn't help herself for feeling a bit sorry for Sue.

"Hate to keep answering your questions with I don't know, but it's the truth. Bartered tobacco, hides, and coin for the mules and a whole pile of other stuff for the children and Sue.

"Then turned around and bartered the team for the flatboat we hauled her cotton—and the lint I'd bought, too—on to New Orleans."

"You bought cotton?"

"Got it from our neighbors who'd missed the Jefferson buyers like we had."

"Henry Buckmeyer, are you a gambling man?"

He chuckled. "Was once, but I hate to lose. Why do you ask?"

"From what you just told me, sounds like you sure were gambling on that flatboat and buying more cotton."

"I prefer to think of it as investing. The boat could've been poorly constructed and sunk, but I did inspect it beforehand.

"And giving the nickel, a cent less than the buyers offered, wasn't that much of a gamble. I'd heard that the big buyers in New Orleans were paying upwards to a dime, stood to double my money, almost did."

"I suppose I can see where you'd think it was a pretty safe bet; but anyway, go on. You're in Pleasant Mound—that's Mount Pleasant today, right? With only three days to get to Jefferson. How'd you do it?"

He looked off as though searching that time almost two decades ago. The still quietness hung heavy in the room. Then all of a sudden, he launched back into his story with too much detail.

But she didn't write it all down, his words painted such vivid pictures.

Just as he got the wagons to Captain Dangerfield's spring, movement drew her attention toward the hall door, and he followed her gaze.

Rebecca stood half in. "Daddy, I need to..." She glanced at May. "I'm sorry. Do you mind terribly if I interrupt?"

May scooted her chair back. "Of course not. I'll leave you two to some privacy and get me a cup of tea. Would you like a cup?"

"No, please. That isn't necessary at all. Stay." She faced her father. "It's Wallace."

Henry leaned forward. "What's he done?"

May stifled a smile. The man was immediately ready to do battle for his baby girl, even if she was all grown up.

“Nothing, well, yes, he has. That’s the problem. Just now he told me that he planned to quit. He swears he loves me more than he ever loved ranging, then he knelt down on one knee and proposed—again.”

She stepped into the room and closed the door. “Daddy, did you know Mary Rachel was in love with Wallace?”

“What, when? How do you know that?”

Rebecca glanced at May then back. “The other day when we were getting our bath, I was telling everyone that Wallace had proposed again while we were in Llano, and Mary Rachel said he wouldn’t have to ask her twice.”

The lovely young lady filled her lungs then exhaled slowly. “I’ve been watching her real close since, and whenever Wallace is around, she can’t take her eyes off him.”

Henry shook his head. “Mercy, girl, I don’t know what to tell you.”

May did, but should she get involved?

Rebecca slipped into the chair next to her daddy then leaned back. “What about you, Miss May? What do you think?”

She looked from the daughter to her father; the man gave her a little nod like he’d appreciate her offering some feminine advice.

“It’s obvious that you’re in love with the Captain, dear, and if he’s willing to give up being a Texas Ranger—and that’s been your only objection—then the solution is simple. Say yes.”

“What about Mary Rachel? I don’t want to break my sister’s heart.”

“Don’t worry about that. She’s young and in love with love. He’s the only man she knows who can compare with her daddy and the Major. You mark what I say, she’ll be happy for the both of you, especially after the right man comes along for her.”

She turned toward her father. “Do you think I can trust Wallace? Will he run off the next time some idiot decides to start another war?”

“I’ve never known the man to lie; so long as you don’t hold stretching a yarn against him.”

“Guess I better send him in to you then.”

“What for?”

“Doesn’t he have to ask your permission?”

Henry laughed. “Yes, darling, but he did that years ago.”

“What’d you tell him?”

“That if he hurt you, or wasn’t a gentleman at all times, I’d kill him dead and feed him to the hogs. But yes, he asked and got my permission to court my favorite daughter—and marry her if she agreed.”

“Oh, Daddy, am I doing the right thing?” She glanced at May and

smiled. "I do love him, but the thought of him running off like...." She stopped herself. "Uh, I better not say more about that, I don't want to steal...."

She stood. "Forgive me. I'm letting my mouth get the best of me." She strolled to the door then turned around. "Thank you, Miss May." Holding the door's jamb, she gazed toward the ceiling and let her whole face smile. "I'm going to be a bride."

Goose bumps covered May's legs and arms. How did that feel to know you'd be wed to the man you loved? Would she ever accept a proposal? "You're welcome, dear."

Henry stared into the hall until the sound of rustling petticoats died then faced her. "You sure about her being in love with Wallace?"

She laughed. "Yes, of course, I am."

"How?"

"All the signs are there. Trust me, I know about these things. Remember, I write romance novels for a living."

"And there won't be trouble between her and her sister?"

"No, none at all. Mary Rachel will be fine. Again, can you trust me?"

Henry stared at her for too many beats of May's heart. Could the man see all the way into her soul? She wanted to look away, but more than anything, she wanted to leap all the way into his heart.

Such an excellent specimen, but no man was perfect. Could she truly give her heart to him? Especially with all his silly superstitions.

He nodded. "Yes, of course. Good advice, May. It all makes sense. Mary Rachel thinking her sister was never going to say yes, and Wallace is a great boy. Well, he's turned into a fine man." He leaned forward, glanced to the door. "Will you talk with my Mary Rachel?"

"I'll be happy to." The desire to jump over the desk and smother him with kisses and hugs proved almost more than she could bear. She longed to whisper in his ear that it would all work out with all his favorite daughters.

He needed her by his side, he really needed her. She wiggled a bit in his chair. It all felt so right—sitting where he sat and being a part of his life.

"Good. So where were we? Oh yes, Captain Daingerfield's springs."

For the next few minutes, Henry told her about Sue losing her temper with the preacher. "We heard a few years later that the man and his son got tarred and feathered then run out of town for stealing from their church's poor fund."

He shrugged. "Sue told me that was the day she realized she loved me." He leaned forward, seemed to her he was trying too hard to hide his feelings. "The next night I asked her to marry me. At first she said

yes then started crawfishing.”

“Are you talking about mudbugs, the little lobster looking things that back up with their claws out?”

“Yes, but we call them crawdads. Anyway I already knew about her vow and assured her I would get her father’s blessing, but it turned out me not being a Christian was her biggest objection.”

She set her quill down and looked up. “Will that be a problem with us, Henry?”

“I hope not.”

His answer bothered May, but now didn’t seem the moment to press. Some superstitions were hard to break. She’d heard tell about folks who would go blocks out of their way to keep from crossing a black cat’s path.

Such nonsense about a benevolent creator watching over the ones who chose to follow his son—well, a bunch of hog wash, that’s what it was.

Her Chester’s believing wasn’t so hard to swallow. He’d been indoctrinated when just a piccaninny. Show her a slave who wouldn’t want to think a better place existed out there somewhere, and she’d show you a corpse.

“Anyway, what was it? Two or three days later, right before I died, I got myself saved.”

She shook her head. “Sorry, what did you say? “ She had to pay closer attention and not let her mind wander off on tangents. “Did you say you died and went to heaven?”

“No, I said right before I died. I was about to, but let me back up. I need to tell you about the buyers leaving and Levi getting soaked and —”

“Hold it.” She threw up her hands still holding her quill. “Patrick Henry Buckmeyer, you are one fantastic storyteller. Plus, I love the sound of your voice, but you need to stay linear and stop jumping all over the place.”

“Don’t mean to make it difficult.”

“I must keep things straight. Now when you asked Sue to marry you out under the stars, what happened?” She hated asking, but wanted to know. “Did you kiss her?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Awe, Henry, how unromantic.” She pouted her bottom lip. “Go ahead then. Give me the details.”

“Beautiful night, the heat had broke some, and these folks, we thought they were Gypsies, but —”

“Why’d you think they were Gypsies?”

“The bells on their wagon.” He smiled and continued his telling. She didn’t much care for the recollections, but he kept his voice even

like he'd relived that night so many times that it had lost its passion.

Would that ever happen to her?

Could she ever be so deeply in love that the night she said yes would fade into memory? She could only hope. And if it wasn't with Henry, could she ever find another man who'd compare with him?

At forty-one, how much time did she have? Was she wasting what few days she might have left being here with him?

How big of a wedge would her unbelief be?

Footfalls stopped him, then CeCe filled the doorway. "Mammy says it's time to wash up, and the Major and Miss Rose say they've got big news.

"Best hurry, Daddy, the line is getting long at the pump."

Chapter



Seventeen

Henry blessed the food himself then kept hold of May's hand while he nodded toward Levi. "Major, I heard tell you and Rose have some news. Want to share now?"

"Yes, sir." He smiled at his wife. "You tell them."

The red-headed beauty beamed. "Well, it's happy news because the Lord has blessed us. I guess I'll just blurt it right out. We're finally in a family way. Expecting a wee new Baylor. I thought I might be before we left for Llano, but now I know for sure. Come next spring, we'll have us a baby!"

The girls all jumped to their feet and mobbed Rose, then once the commotion died and everyone returned to their places, Wallace stood and faced Henry.

"Excuse me, sir." Then he looked to Levi. "Partner, don't mean to steal your thunder or nothing, but we've got some news, too." He extended his hand and Rebecca let him pull her to her feet.

"This beautiful lady who I've loved for almost ten years now—long before I ever even met her—has finally made me the happiest man on the face of the earth. She's agreed to marry this old Ranger, so we're getting hitched."

Rebecca's smile gleamed. She glanced toward May then her oldest sister. "I can't believe it. I'm getting married!"

More commotion ensued, and all the little girls let loose squeals aplenty. Amidst the pandemonium, May squeezed his hand. He smiled at her. She returned the gesture with a slight grin, but her eyes held a deep sorrow. Bless the Lord.

Would it be his turn one fine day?

Soften her heart toward You, Father. Let her see the error of her ways and need for the Savior. Please confirm what's in my heart. Don't let me do anything to hurt my family.

That evening, after things settled down, he and May retreated to his study. Like it was someone else's life, he told her how he and Sue finally got married at her daddy's house in Memphis.

Twice during the telling, her eyes filled with tears, but she kept

her emotions in check. After a bit of soft silence, she leaned back in his chair. He liked her sitting it.

She capped the ink well then set her quill down. "Did you notice Charley during his mother's big announcement?"

"I did. He'll get over it."

"I've got a question. Why hasn't his name been changed to Baylor? Mary Rachel said his mother and Nightengale weren't really ever legally married, and that Levi's been the only father the boy's known.

"Yes, other than the Indian chief." Henry blew out a lungful of air. "About a month after Levi rescued Rose, on their way here—he was bringing her home—they ran into this old man at a camp meeting along the way.

"The guy told Charley, four-years-old at the time." He stopped himself. The words were written in his Bible, but he couldn't remember them exactly. "Well, best get the Major to tell you that story.

"But Charley says if he's going to get a new name, he has to earn it. That's the Comanche in him."



May didn't exactly understand the logic in not changing Charley's name, but if the boy wanted it that way, who was she to question it? "Who was Bart named after?"

"He's got Levi's middle name, Bartholomew, and he's a Baylor."

Of course, that probably made things worse. "Do you think you should talk to Charley about the baby?"

"No, ma'am."

Why did he do that? Men could be so...so... "Why not?"

"Isn't my place. I do plan on saying something to Levi."

Oh. That made sense, but why did she have to drag it out of him? Men were so tight lipped. She scooted the chair back and stood. "Guess I best turn in."

She was certain her feet heard the words that just came out of her mouth, but they didn't move.

"How about a night cap? Out on the porch? Mammy makes a splendid hot toddy."

"I'd love one." As she took his arm and headed outside, she refrained from telling him that she really wanted to go the other direction—through the forbidden door with him.

But more than a night in his bed, she wanted it all, the whole of the man, his nights for sure, but his days as well.

The toddy warmed her insides like Henry's presence warmed her soul. It was indeed splendid, but the hundreds of lightning bugs

dancing on the moonbeams almost made Heaven come down to earth.

She remembered seeing a few as a child in Virginia, but Texas certainly must suit them.

Sitting there next to the man was by far the best. She glanced at her fingers intertwined with his. This is how she'd love to conclude every day for the rest of her life.

Too soon, it ended. And she made her feet carry her upstairs.

One more time, she slipped into an empty bed. She fluffed one of the pillows and hugged the other tight. Hopefully, one night, one fine day not too far into her future, it wouldn't be a sack of feathers she cuddled.

The next morning after breakfast, she managed to get Rebecca alone long enough to hear her take on Henry and Sue falling in love, then a few minutes with the Major propelled her upstairs to Mary Rachel's room—or May's—because she had no intention of giving it back, not for a while anyway.

Before, and then after dinner, she soiled paper. Three false starts and six rewrites built a rather large pile of crumpled pages. That wasn't unusual, getting a new novel off and running always proved to be hardest.

It had to be perfect. Finally, a bit before supper, she had a first page she could show Henry.

That notion pushed her back in her chair. Before, it had always been Chester she wanted to read her work, but she'd hardly seen him or even thought much about her brother.

She snickered, didn't call him that or normally ever even think it. He was so concerned about her pure white cousins discovering the truth of her heritage and enslaving her and him.

She hugged herself. Henry had said he wouldn't ever let anything or anyone hurt her again. She planned on seeing to it that he kept that promise. You're just being a fool, Millie May.

He'll rip you heart out and leave you lonelier than you've ever been. For much too long a time, she listened to that part of herself that had been wounded so long ago, but finally shook off the blackness.

She wasn't twelve anymore, and Henry wasn't the commodore.

What was wrong with her? She hadn't called herself by that name in years. May Meriwether spoke to who she was—renowned author, strong, successful and in love for the first time in her life.

But how could that be true? She barely knew Henry Buckmeyer. What had it been? A week? Oh, good gracious. It had only been a week. That's just ridiculous.

And he certainly didn't know her. He couldn't be in love with her. Just like all the others, the man only wanted a tumble—and he had

plenty of hay. But if that were true...wouldn't he have invited her on into his bedroom?

He had the opportunity.

Or perhaps invited her to share a dip in that enormous tub that day she was alone with him at the bathhouse.

He was only waiting for the right moment, then he'd –"

Stop it! They'd ship her to Bedlam if she kept that up. Henry wasn't like that.

She stood, blew on the page, and waved it gently, way longer than necessary. Certain the ink wouldn't smudge, she headed downstairs to his library. She knocked on the jam then peeked in the open door.

"Henry, you in here?"

Footfalls sounded. The forbidden portal opened. "Hey, you get that first chapter written?"

"No, but, well." She held out the page. "What do you think? Is it a good start?"

He took the offering then slipped into his chair. She eased into the wingback then watched him read her words. His eyes danced over the page. His lips broke into a huge smile, and he looked up.

"Great start. You have a huge talent, May, but now I'm conflicted."

"About what?"

"Two things. I want to read more, but I don't like you hiding upstairs all day." He laughed. "At least you came down to eat."

She nodded. Her heart and stomach had demanded it, but she didn't care for spending the day alone either. "Oh, you had me worried there for a minute. I'm glad that's all it is, and believe me when I say, I'm in agreement.

"But when writing, I've been compared to a hibernating bear. I hole up and sling ink and can get rather grouchy if interrupted."

He tapped his desk. "Write here. I promise not to bother you. Much."

The man kept his word except that even with him silently walking through, he bothered her something terrible. Sitting in his chair, the forbidden portal right there for a glance anytime she wanted, touching his desk, it all troubled her in a wonderful sort of way.

Could that be what love was like?

She'd certainly heard about—even written about—love at first sight, but in her heart, she never believed it possible, always considered it a fairytale dream.

After only three days of the wonderful madness, she had it. It made Rebecca cry. Mary Rachel swore May had to have known her mother.

But she loved Henry's reaction best. That crooked grin when he

read the last page of the first chapter made it all worthwhile; all the scribbling, the crumpled pages, and searching for the exact right words.

He looked toward the hall then turned back with a broad smile, the one she loved the best.

“What?”

Before he could answer, Laura hurried through the door with a dress over each arm. In one hand, she carried ribbons and lace, and in the other, her sewing kit.

“Good afternoon, ma’am. Mister Henry thought a new dress for church was in order, but I’ve only got time to finish one. We thought you should pick your favorite.”

“Oh, Henry! Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

She took his arm and led him toward the door, then sent him away with a quick peck on his cheek and a whisper in his ear. “You spoil me something terrible. I love it.”

His expression was great, like for two dresses he should get more than a peck on his cheek. She gave him a little shove and the last look before she closed the door was even better, his eyes spoke a thousand words.

Wait, this is my library. What are you doing? But his mouth grinned that appealing, crooked little grin. He was too handsome.

“Get on now. I need to try on these dresses.” She resisted the urge to jerk it open and give him proper payment for his gifts.

“Fine.” Through the door, his tone held a nice mixture of irritation and mirth. “I need to heat bath water anyway. There’s a full-length mirror in my room. Feel free.”

Spinning in front of his mirror until almost dizzy, she picked the pale blue one with the floral bodice, tiny forget-me-nots if she remembered correctly.

Henry’s room wasn’t just a little bit bigger and nicer than Mary Rachel’s, it looked twice the size and was possibly the most impressive, manly room she’d ever walked into.

First thing, a massive stone fireplace standing strong on the north end set the mood. The ceiling had to be fifteen feet high and enormous rough hewn beams held it in place.

And the windows, she loved them, sunlight streamed in the open top halves while elegant heavy drapes hung over the lower half to the floor and offered complete privacy.

She imagined Henry built the beautiful four-poster bed himself. It screamed for her to come jump on it, and if Laura hadn’t been standing right there, she’d do exactly that.

Oh, for the day. She stopped herself.

Would that night ever come? He certainly seemed as interested in her as she was in him, but could she get past his religious superstitions?

While the young girl worked on trimming the dress, May pondered the seamstress. "How old are you, Laura?"

"Twenty-one. I's fifteen when I came up here to Red River County. Lace was a brand newborn. Matter of fact, birthed her on the way."

"During travel? In a wagon? I'm sorry, don't mean to be nosey. She's beautiful, her hair so raven black."

"Well, in a hotel room, and Captain Baylor insisted we stay an extra day. And thank you, she's always been the prettiest little thing. Her pa was a Comanche. Levi and Wallace picked me up same time as Sassy, I mean Rose."

Though May would love to know more, the girl fell silent, perhaps reliving past days. Whatever, she shut down her curiosity and studied the room, tickled to finally have the chance to see his inner sanctum. He must have given away all of Sue's things.

The room reflected its single resident—all Henry, wholly masculine. Had it always looked such? Would that be another sore point between them?

She definitely needed some of her things in the room she lived in. What would it be like to live with him? Share his room? Oh, how'd she love to find out, but then it would be too late if she hated it.

How ridiculous to think such a thing. No way could she ever hate anything about the man. Just couldn't happen.

Henry Buckmeyer had to be the most wonderful hairy brute she'd ever come across. If only her mother could have met him.

The bath and visit with all the big girls served as a pleasant diversion from the intensity of the past three days of being creative. She loved how they all made her feel a part of the family, just like she belonged.

And that everyone wanted to talk about her new chapter, made her want to get back to Henry's library and pen the second.

Relishing the luxury of immersing herself in the warm water, her only regret was that a swim hadn't been arranged, but the little girls had taken too much time reading her new story, and she had to answer all their questions.

Little Bonnie kept asking her about her mother, and what she was like as though May had known her.

As the wonderful time neared its end, Rose climbed out. Her chemise clung to her expanding belly.

A longing rushed over and through May that refused to be repressed. It started in the lowest part of her torso and made its way to her heart, unfettered. She was so jealous.

Would she ever know the joy? If only....

The next morning, she made it a point to be almost fifteen minutes early for church. Rising at the crack of dawn was a small enough price to pay to please Henry.

He waited at the foot of the grand staircase, and she adored his expression watching her descend. Being himself, he made her feel so attractive, so desired.

Taking his arm at the bottom, she leaned in close. "I don't think I've ever been this early for anything in my life. I did it for you."



Henry escorted her to the sully. "The dress is very becoming. I love that shade on you. Blue's your color, then again, so is lavender."

She beamed then patted his hand. "I owe you."

"Don't be silly, you don't owe me anything."

"Yes, I do. That peck on the cheek wasn't enough. This dress is worth much more, and I love the pink one, too."

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers, pressing hard. "That's going to have to be it for now. I don't know if I could stand more."

She nodded, the same was true for her, then leaned into him and fell silent. He looked skyward.

Oh, Lord, am I being a fool? She seems so right, but I know she's so wrong. Save her Father, have someone say something that will convince her of how much she needs you.

The first cluster of houses and barns came into view, and she sat up and fussed with her hair, trying to make herself even more beautiful. He liked it that she didn't pinch her cheeks.

He also liked—no loved—having her on his arm as he strolled toward the tabernacle. Heads turned, and the obvious envy grew so deep, it should have muddied his boots.

The service fell flat. Everyone seemed uninterested in praising the Lord. Even the preacher's words lacked their usual conviction or even any passion.

Henry had been hoping for some fire and divine lightning and May walking the aisle. Once the closing prayer was prayed, he squired her to the food-laden tables.

"First Sunday is always dinner on the grounds, one of my favorite traditions."

She stopped and stared at him. "But I didn't bring anything. Why didn't you tell me?"

"You didn't have to, you're a guest. Mammy and the girls brought enough to feed a small army. You're well represented, don't worry."

“Well, I can cook. Maybe not as well as Mammy, but –”

“I’d love to try anything you’d like to fix, but truly, there’s always too much.” He leaned in close and lowered his voice. “I know the dishes to avoid, so keep an eye on me in the serving line. We can move along together on opposite sides of the tables.”

Maybe that’s what it had been. All the ladies worrying so that they would get on his don’t-eat list, they failed to give the Lord his due. Halfway through his inspection, a loud angry voice stopped him short.

“Henry Buckmeyer!”

He patted May’s hand then released her arm.

Frank Cooper stood in the road, just off the church’s property. A Kentucky long rifle, already half-cocked, rested in the crook of his left arm, and a brown jug hung from his hand.

Two pistols rode his belt, stuffed in, and an Arkansas toothpick hung in its scabbard behind the pistol on his right. The man swayed a bit.

He searched the crowd. “Get your worthless hide out here, Buckmeyer.”

Henry put his hand on May’s back and eased her to the side, then walked straight toward the man through the gathering crowd. Levi and Wallace closed fast to his left, but he didn’t see any of his babies. “What’s troubling you this fine Sunday, Sergeant?”

“What do you think, Colonel? I guess you know. You are! I got home three days ago, and my Lizbeth finally fessed up last night. Told me all about what’s been going on between the two of you.”

Henry held his hands up, palms out. “Now wait, Cooper, I don’t know what your wife’s been telling you, but the only thing Lizbeth and I have been doing together is attending the same church, and she’s not been too regular at that of late.”

Frank dropped the jug and swung the rifle around pointing it at Henry. “Say what you want, but I know the truth. Best not be lying, Buckmeyer, not when you’re about to meet your Maker.” He thumbed the hammer to full cock.

Henry sprang forward. The flash stung his cheeks. The mini ball sliced into his left arm. Frank swung the rifle back just as Henry reached him.

He threw his left arm up and grabbed the younger man then pushed him to the ground, falling on top of him. Henry gathered himself and drove his right fist into the man’s nose.

He raised his left, but it protested, so he pulled his right back and hit Frank again. Forced his left to deliver the next blow, then readied the right again, but a vice clamped around his arm and stopped his swing.

“Uncle, stop. You don’t want to kill him.”

He let Levi pull him to his feet. Wallace yanked Frank upright. His swollen nose ran blood, but his eyes still spewed hate.

Perhaps Levi shouldn’t have stopped him so soon. Before Henry got the dust knocked off, May and all his little ladies took to fussing over him. Wouldn’t do any good to protest, so he let them.

Right away, a change came over May.

While she acted pleasant enough, her smiles came fewer and didn’t hold their usual sparkle. Halfway home, she bumped his good arm with her shoulder.

“So. You and legally-single Lizbeth have been seeing each other? That where you been going every morning?”

Chapter



Eighteen

May couldn't make the images of Henry and Lizbeth entwined in a passionate embrace go away. She didn't want to believe it of him, but after all, he was a man, a hairy beast like all the rest.

Besides, what business was it of hers? He was a widower, and if the young woman was legally single...did she have the right to say anything?

Probably not.

"No, ma'am. I have never so much as encouraged that woman in any way." Henry leaned away and looked insulted. "She's had eyes for me since she was fourteen years old, but I have never—and would never—act on it."

"Oh."

He flicked the reins then chuckled. "Sue was jealous of her, too."

"I don't blame her—Sue, not that Lizbeth person. Your wife had every reason to be jealous the way that young woman handles herself."

"We weren't married then. It was on our first day on the trace."

"I wanted to think you'd be innocent, but to hear it out of your own mouth." She faced front and watched the landscape on her side. "Now what I'm really upset about is you going and almost getting your fool head blown off. That soaked chowderhead could've killed you."

"Well, I didn't see I had many options."

She unwound her arm from his and put both her fists on her hips, turning slightly toward him. "Tell me what would have been wrong with taking off in the other direction? The Major and Wallace were both there. Either one of them could've handled things. The man wasn't gunning for them. But could you let them take care of the guy? No. You push me aside and walk right toward trouble."

"Mercy."

"He calls you out, eyes spitting angry fire, obviously drunk—out of his mind—and what do you do? Walk straight toward him, right into a bullet."

“It isn’t in me to run away from trouble, May. And I’m not afraid to die. I’m convinced that I will live however long the Lord wants me to. Frank Cooper—or anyone else—won’t change that. Can’t.”

She wanted to slap him.

There he went again with those ridiculous religious superstitions. How could he think some high-powered, all-knowing being lived in the sky and cared one whit for him?

Almost got him killed.

If there was a God, she’d be mad at Him. So because his Lord had Henry’s days numbered, he could face any danger? No matter the consequences to all the people who loved him.

How could she live with that? She pondered her own question a minute, but knew the answer from the start. She couldn’t.

“How’s your arm?”

“Hurts some. I’ll be sore awhile.”

“How come the Major had to stop you?”

Henry shrugged. “Guess because he knows me. Knows what I’m capable of when I get protective. And I was. In the condition that man was in, he could’ve easily missed me and shot one of my babies.”

She sighed and leaned in against him. He was right of course. He wouldn’t be who he was if he’d run. Yet, she hated the thought of him ever being in harm’s way, something happening to him.

After another wonderful hot toddy, and a very pleasant evening on the front porch, she again found herself crawling into Mary Rachel’s bed alone. He wouldn’t even let her change his bandage.

Not that she made a good nurse.

Truth be known, the sight of blood—even the thought of blood—made her nauseous. It always had, since...since... She lay in the silence and forced her thoughts back to Henry.

Bet he let Sue doctor him.

Finally, she found comfort in thinking on chapter two when she would introduce Henry. She pictured him alone at a log cabin washing bois d’arc seeds and smoking animal furs.

Imagine, he wouldn’t sell those furs because Sue had slept on them. What a romantic, what an astonishing contradiction.

Instead of Sue riding in, May rode Larry Dawson’s big gelding, sitting with her back erect, but sideways in the saddle, her skirt draping the horse’s hindquarters.

She’d say, ‘I have a proposition for you, Mister Buckmeyer.’ Then she’d skip the part about needing his help and ask him straight out, ‘What do you say to you and me getting married?’

With a smile on her lips, she cuddled her pillow and closed her eyes with him taking hold of the horse’s headstall, grinning that crooked grin of his, and looking up at her.

Hoping with all her might that her dream might come true, she found sleep just as she got to the church on her wedding day.

Meadow larks and rattling chains yanked her to consciousness. She cradled the extra pillow like a baby. A sob and high pitched wail drew her out of bed and to the balcony.

Henry stood next to a wagon with that legally single Lizzie's hand on his shoulder. She threw on her housecoat and ran downstairs barefooted.

At the last riser, she stopped and composed herself, ran her fingers through the mass of curls, trying to bring a semblance of order, then with her chin held high, strolled outside as though nothing was amiss.

The near side of the girl's swollen, bruised face caused her to immediately retract her cat claws. The poor thing.

"Oh, my! Lizzie, dear girl. Henry, get her inside so we can tend her."

The battered woman shook her head. "No. Thank you, ma'am, but I gotta get back. I cain't stay."

May insisted, and the younger woman allowed her to usher her to the kitchen. Once Mammy applied one of her poultices, and sweet coffee and two cookies sat in front of Lizzie, she looked across May to Henry.

"Pa would roll over in his grave if I's to take a mortgage on that land. I cain't take a loan, I gotta sell it and get far away fast as I can. 'Fore Frank gets out. You're famous for your dickerin', Henry."

She glanced at May and smiled. "I bet he's never been on the wrong end of a deal."

Henry cleared his throat. "Wouldn't that be wonderful if it was true?"

"Oh, everybody knows, that's for sure." She gave him a knowing nod. "I'm thinking a thousand dollars is a right fair price. It's a good block of black land. You know that. If I didn't have to git...."

"That's a plenty fair enough price, and I wouldn't think of trying to beat you up over it. Looks like you've had enough of that to last a couple of lifetimes. No, I'll pay your price, Lizbeth. Did you bring the deed?"

"Yes, sir, I sure did. Got it right here." She dug into her apron pocket and pulled out a folded paper then handed it over.

He opened it and briefly studied it. "You want bank notes or coin?"

The girl hung her head. "If it's all the same, I'll take gold coin. The sheriff promised me even if Frank's brother comes and posts bail, he'd slow walk it to give me time to get out of the valley. I'm done with that no good man."

"You ladies will excuse me." Henry left the room.

The girl turned toward May. "I cain't tell you how bad I feel, ma'am, that my lying almost got Henry kilt."

"That sorry soaker beat on me till I do swear, I'd of told him whatever he wanted to hear that might get him to leave, awful as that is."

"Soon as them words come out of my mouth, I felt terrible."

"I simply cannot imagine, you dear woman."

"See, Frank knew from the beginning how I loved Henry." She grinned shyly. "Suppose everyone in the county knows I been loving that man since I's only fourteen."

"When Frank asked me to marry him, he claimed it didn't make no never mind to him. Guess he lied."

May got up and refilled her coffee cup. She held the pot up, but Lizzie shook her head. Not knowing what to say, she just let the girl keep talking.

The poor thing looked up at the ceiling, still shaking her head and revealed reddened streaks around her throat. Looked like that awful beast had strangled her.

"Still, I wouldn't never of married Frank had I knowed Miss Sue was going to kick the bucket." She faced May. "In all these years of loving Henry Buckmeyer, I only kissed him once."

"That was back when I's still fourteen on a Lord's Day. We's at the Sunday gathering, but he didn't kiss me back." She shook her head. "I only wished he'd look at me the way he looks at you. I'd never leave if he did."

Though May loved the girl saying such, noticing the way Henry looked at her was special, she hated that poor Lizzie had suffered so for an unrealized love—what's more sorrowful?

But then to endure terrible physical abuse stacked on top of that. Sorry husband of hers needed to be tarred and feathered then run out of town like that mean old preacher Henry mentioned who'd attacked Levi when he was only a boy.

"Where will you go, Lizbeth? Do you have family?"

"A brother. I figured Frank will think I headed that way, he lives up in Pennsylvania, but I'm going to fool him. I'm traveling west to California. Thought I might find me some of that gold."

"Heard it's laying around on the ground. And I ain't never seen an ocean neither. Who knows, might find me my own Henry Buckmeyer out there, too. A good man who'll love me."

May held her peace though she didn't think there could be another Henry.



Though he knew full well he was overpaying, Henry would be glad to have the Aikin block. Once he weighed out the gold and had her sign the deed, he made out a quitclaim and asked May and Jean Paul to witness it.

He got the girl on her way to safety, and hopefully, out of his life. Slipping back inside, he poured himself a hot cup of coffee and sat next to the novelist.

“So is this what you look like first thing in the morning?”

She immediately went to messing with her curly hair. Her ringlets fascinated him. “Yes, I guess so. When I saw who’d come calling, I thought you might need some help.”

“I did, and thank you. Want to go see my new block of black dirt?”

“If you can give me a few minutes, I’d love to, especially if it’s on the way to your old cabin—the one you and your mom lived in. You said it was still standing, right? I’d like to see it, you know, for the book.”

“Yes, no, and yes.” He loved her quizzical nature and that grin.

“Care to explain yourself, sir?”

“Yes, I can give you some time. No, my old cabin is not on the way. And yes, it is still standing, or was last time I went by.”

While she hurried away to try and make herself even more beautiful—he didn’t think that was possible—he decided to go north and east instead, save the Aikin place for another day.

If memory served, nothing had been planted in the year Frank had been gone. Might cut some hay and get the farmland ready for cotton in the spring. Maybe even log the creeks some.

Whatever, he’d talk to Jean Paul about it. See what he thought.

Quicker than he ever expected, she waltzed into the barn ready to go. He finished harnessing The Black, stowed the picnic dinner Mammy had thrown together for his excursion, gave New Blue the stay sign and off he went with the beautiful lady.

Short of the gate to his old homeplace, he stopped the rig and faced May. “Right over there.” He pointed to a pile of rocks. “Mother and I gathered those out of the creek.

“Took us better part of a morning; we both were so excited to have so much land. One of my biggest regrets—now it’s doubled.”

“What Henry? You’re talking in riddles. What is it you mean by that?”

“Mother never knew Sue, and now you. She would have loved you both, and her grandbabies. She loved children, but she up and went to Heaven, left me an orphan.”



The sorrow in the man's voice cut May's heart. She put her arm around his back and pressed close. "I'm so sorry. I'd would have loved her, too, I'm sure of it. How could I not? She reared such a wonderful son." She laid her head on his shoulder.

He looked at her and nodded. Tears streamed down his cheeks. Handsome and strong, yet sensitive, too; had to be the perfect man. Did she know of any faults?

"I'd give every last nickel I own to have her back, but mercy, I'll see her again, and for sure she's in a better place. That last month...I wouldn't want her back if she had to endure even one more day in that kind of pain."

She pulled back. There clearly, the chink in his armor, his imperfection. Poor delusional man. As much as she wanted a life with Henry Buckmeyer, how could she go along with such foolishness?

Thinking his dead really lived, and that someday he'd be reunited with them. How could he rationalize such craziness? Could she put up with it? She'd never want to reunite with the commodore.

Then again, would a life without Henry be worth living?

He wiped his cheeks and stared off. "Mercy, don't know what got over me." After a bit, he turned toward her and stared into her eyes. "Maybe I do know. I'd built this wall around my heart, and here you've come and torn it down."

She stared back. Did his stupid religion really matter?

Tilting her chin up, she leaned in closer, willed him to meet her, smother her with kisses. He licked his lips then pressed them gently against hers, but much too quickly, pulled back, gritted his teeth, and shook his head. He looked away. "I apologize. We can't."

She leaned back in the seat. Why did he always have to be right? But like he was want to say, mercy, she didn't want him to stop. For the rest of the outing, while he gave her the grand tour, she fantasized of the most wonderful of nights when at last he wouldn't have to stop.

Before Henry, her imaginations centered on the grandeur of her wedding, but now, he was her focus, not her walking the aisle to him, but what came after all the guests had celebrated with them then gone home to their regular lives.

That's when she would bask in his love and know oneness at last. Her dream, come true.

Each tidbit of information pulled her from her daydream, and while pleasant to get the gist of his old home place—no trouble setting the scene—her desire for having such a future place.

A home with Henry.

Being his wife, one with him, overwhelmed her senses. She didn't even want to remain in the reality of the now.

Had she ever wanted something so bad and not been able to have

it? Only he could heal her condition, but how could she obtain that elixir? Find a salve to slather on her heart that would ease the longing?

Doomed to be lovesick for however many days it took to get the man to the altar, she sighed.

The sun dipped below the tree line before he stopped The Black in front of his porch. Instead of happy faces and boisterous babies greeting them, Mammy and Jean Paul waited, looking like the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse had just been spotted storming over the hill.

Chapter



Nineteen

Henry didn't like the expressions on their faces. Levi burst out the door with the rest of the clan and its comforting noise hot on his heels. The ranger descended the stairs two at a time then took The Black in hand.

"You go on inside, Uncle. I'll see to this."

"Fine, what's afoot?"

He nodded toward Mammy. "The traders. They've located her brother."

Henry helped May down then escorted her up the steps where the dear black woman wadded a handful of apron.

"Are they sure it's him, Mammy? What's wrong? Is he sick?"

"Yes, sir, it's him alright, and he's in good health, but that trader say the man what owns him won't never sell him unless...." She shook her head facing down.

"Unless what, Mammy?"

She looked up. "He wants you, sir. Says you gots to come your own self and bring plenty of gold coin."

Henry put his hand on her shoulder and guided her inside. "Where is this man? Do you know his name?"

"Bull Glover, sir."

Of its own accord, a shiver washed over him at the mention of the man. "Where is he?"

"New Orleans."

He faced Jean Paul. "You know your uncle by sight?"

"Yes, sir."

"Pack a bag; we'll leave in the morning."

"Oh, Mister Henry, you don't have to do this. You've done so much already."

He smiled. "Don't you fret, Mammy, actually, I do. Couldn't live with myself if I didn't."

"I'm going with you."

He turned sideways and faced May. "No, please. You stay here and work on your story. Wouldn't be right, us traveling together."

"Chester can go with us, or Mary Rachel. Whoever, it'll be fine."

Oh, Lord, she tempted him so. He took her hand hoping she would

not press the matter. "Jean Paul and I can travel light, get there and back in ten days or less."

Her lips pouted, and her eyes narrowed. The spoiled brat he'd seen glimpses of threatened to burst out, but he gave her the same look he used on his girls when they tried to get him to do something he knew he shouldn't do.

"Will you promise me?"

"What?"

"That you'll be back in less than two weeks?"

He smiled. "No, too many things can happen, and I regard my word too highly, but I promise to return as quick as humanly possible."



May held her peace and tongue through supper and a bit of writing in his library, but once she had him alone on the porch sipping Mammy's finest of hot toddies, she checked to make sure no little ears listened then faced him.

"I truly should go with you, Henry. I could be of help. I know New Orleans."

He took a sip then shook his head. "So do I, and no, ma'am. You need to stay here."

"Two weeks? I don't want to spend a fortnight without you."

"Neither do I."

"Then let me go."

"No, May." He lifted his chin and seemed to search the far tree line, but he could be just as stubborn as he wanted.

She would not relent though, not that easily. "Why not? Give me one good reason."

Looking off for a bit longer, he finally turned back. "Glover and I have a history. If I have to kill the man, I don't want you anywhere near."

"Henry!" What in the world had happened between him and that man? "Forget going. I mean altogether. If Glover is out to hurt you, Mammy will understand."

"It's more than that. My sins are coming home to roost. Turn coward now, I'll not be any good to you or anyone else."

"The poet says discretion is the better part of valor. You running off and getting yourself killed is definitely not the answer."

He laughed. "The sissy who penned that nonsense wouldn't make it a month in Texas. You can't run from a fight, my dear, and bless the Lord, He'll go before me. His prophet Isaiah reported the Lord said 'no weapon formed against me will prosper.'"

There he went again, quoting scripture. How could she reason with a thick-headed brute who thought an old book written by dead men had all the answers. “Well, you better not get yourself hurt—or worse. I’ve waited too long for you to come along.”

He nodded, but didn’t say anything.

She thought about asking him to promise again, but he wouldn’t. Besides what good would it do? Just like that Frank guy shooting him. Henry hadn’t done one thing wrong; just showed up at church.

What past sin had he referred to coming home to roost? Then again, did she really want to know?

Well, there was something that she did want. Wouldn’t take all the sting out of him being gone for ten days—or longer—but it might help some. “If I cannot accompany you, may I have a boon, kind sir?”

He laughed. “And exactly what would my lady desire, other than going with me?”

“Might you allow me to move into your room while you’re gone?”

“What?” He laughed even harder. “You might not like my bed much should a big storm roll in.”

“Why do you say that?”

“You’ll have to share it with Houston for sure, Bonnie probably, and no telling who else.”

“No problem.”

He seemed to study his lap too long. “Promise not to change anything?”

“Maybe.”

“What kind of answer is that?”

“Best I can give.”

“Fine, but don’t change much, and you’re out the minute I’m back.”

“Deal.” She stuck her hand out.

But instead of shaking, he jumped to his feet and bowed slightly. “Care to dance, my lady?”

Of course she wanted to dance. She let him pull her to her feet then held his hand while he squired her around the porch. First, a lively polka then shortly, he slowed to a waltz.

But too soon he escorted her inside to the bottom of the stairs and sent her up with a light kiss on her cheek.

She stopped at the first landing and looked back, even now with him still here, she labored to breathe, and not from the dancing. How would she live with him gone?

Sleep came hard then left too soon, but she wasn’t about to slumber through his leaving. With only half her normal primping, she hurried downstairs and followed her nose to Mammy’s kitchen.

At her entering, Henry stood, and pulled out the chair next to him.

“Good morning, Miss Merriwether.” He held her chair then fetched her a cup of coffee, lightened it with cream, and stirred in an extra large dollop of honey.

She loved it that he knew exactly how she liked it, one more silly little reason to hate his leaving. She wouldn’t think about it, not this morning, not right now. She didn’t want to ruin the few hours left.

Two sips of the steaming brew and boot falls pulled him, then her, around. The Rangers strolled in, both flanked by their ladies. It wasn’t fair, they got to sleep together.

Well, not Rebecca, she corrected herself. But it wasn’t fair that Rose and Levi did. They got to be together all the time.

But wait. He carried a carpetbag. With his shirt fresh starched and his trousers creased, his boots shined, and his hat obviously fresh steamed, he looked ready to go somewhere.

May faced Henry. “Levi’s going with you?”

“He insisted.”

She glanced at Rose, who didn’t seem any happier than May about the men running off, then back at Henry. “Is Wallace going, too?”

The Ranger spoke up. “No, ma’am. I’m staying. Someone needs to watch over you ladies.”

Though she truly tried, she could not shove the soon-coming separation from her mind or her heart. The rock in her belly grew with each tick of the grandfather clock until the moment came for the trio to ride off. She hated it all to blue blazes. His absence already choked her.

At least he kissed her. Right in front of everyone, too. She loved that.

Rose and Rebecca stood by her side until the trio vanished over the first hill to the north. She filled her lungs then exhaled. “Ladies, care to help me move my things downstairs?”

Henry’s oldest daughter raised both brows in a rather quizzical expression. “What room are you moving to?”

“Your father said I could stay in his while he’s gone. It’ll make things easier for me using his library to write, and quite frankly being where his things are all around me will soothe my troubled soul.”

Both readily agreed, and neither commented. Each in turn found a private moment to tell May that it must be love, him letting her stay in his room. Not that she ever doubted that, he showed her in every way.

Only made it all the more difficult though; him being gone.

Not all that much to move, but the little girls even got in on the exercise. Dear Mary Rachel coddled her as though aware that May might stump a toe and crumble into a million shattered pieces.

Short of dinner, she settled in. She propped all the pillows on one

side and sat in the bed against the headboard.

No way she could write with her heart so numb. Maybe tomorrow. Or the day after that. What side of the bed did he sleep on? One good-sized oval space on the wall appeared lighter.

What had hung there? It came to her almost as quickly as she'd thought the question. Sue's picture with him. He'd taken it down. He didn't have to do that.

Then again, maybe he did.

She smiled and Rebecca's declaration played through her memory. It has to be love.

How was it that Henry Buckmeyer, that wonderful man, loved her? She didn't deserve him, his love. But he loved her, he truly did, and it made her the most special woman in the world.

Alone with her thoughts, she slowly scanned the room, studying each nook and crevice with acute scrutiny. Those heavy drapes would have to go. She'd replace them with something light, not white though, but airy.

No one came to get her for dinner, and she didn't go. Only her heart hungered. She may not eat again at all until he returned. Refluffing her pillow stack, she got serious and went to planning exactly what all she would want to do.

Soon to become her room—with him—she'd definitely want to remodel, but nothing until he returned. Maybe.

A consultation needed to take place for her to find out which things he loved; wouldn't want him to have to part with any of those. Actually, she wanted to keep most of it.

But the whole room just needed a bit more light and at least a few splashes of color here and there. Henry liked blues if his clothes choices meant anything. Or had Sue picked out most of them?

Maybe Mary Rachel since her mother had been gone.

Tears blurred her vision off and on until sometime between the twelve chimes of midnight and the single strike of the new day, she drifted into a fitful slumber. Seemed for hours she dreamed, tossed and turned.

Or was it the other way around?

Finally, she and her new love lay entwined in the very bed she occupied, then too soon, he vanished on that black charger riding as though he and the horse were one.

She ran after him, but instead of finding Henry, she found herself at Sea Side. The commodore strode its dark and stately corridor toward her.

"Father."

At first, he was his fun old self, and she enjoyed his company, then the scene changed. He opened the closed door and walked in on

her and Chester. She bolted upright.

The no she'd screamed in her sleep fresh on her lips. She swallowed hard and looked about. Where was she?

Oh, yes, Henry's room.

She turned over and squished the feather pillow beneath her face, her heart still racing, fooled by the night vision.

The man was long dead and gone.

Her fault; she'd done it. Gracious! She hadn't had that horrible dream one time while Henry slept under the same roof, then the exact night he leaves, she dreamed of the commodore and the day he died.

Chapter



Twenty

The swaying seemed worse the closer the stage got to Marshall. The Belle never rocked like that coach. Henry understood why Sue hated them so, but they beat horseback for speed.

He touched Levi's boot with his own. His nephew opened his eyes.

"We there?"

"Getting close."

The ranger glanced at Jean Paul who slept in the far corner then back. "Why'd you wake me?"

"I've been thinking about selling the stage line. What's your take?"

He shrugged. "Last I heard, it's turning a fair profit. Why sell?"

"Ever heard of the Butterfield?"

"Who hasn't? What about them?"

"They've got a buyer running around scooping up all the little stage lines like the Clarksville Belle. They haven't made us an offer yet, but word is, they will."

"Do we need the coin?"

"No, but of late I've been reading a lot about trains. Seems to me they're the up and coming preferred way to travel. Thought if we do sell, I'd buy us some railroad stock."

"Don't see how you can ferry a locomotive pulling a mess of boxcars across the Mississippi."

"True, but sooner or later someone will figure out how to bridge it."

He nodded "You're probably right."

"And when that happens...."

"Whatever you think, Uncle, but I have enjoyed owning a piece of the Belle."

"Me, too. Trains sure don't sway like these things. You ever ridden on one?"

"Can't say that I have."

"They roll real smooth." He rapped his knuckles on the window's frame. "Don't have to stop every ten or twelve miles to change horses either."

“True, I hear tell they have dinner cars and sleepers with real beds. Wouldn’t that be something? Travel while you dream all stretched out proper.”

Before he could agree, the driver sounded his bugle. The coach swayed hard to the right. Jean Paul sat up. “We there?”

“Seems so.”

“Marshall?”

Henry grinned. “Hope so.”

“Is that yarn Wallace tells about Whetstone true?”

Levi laughed. “We both heard it for a fact, but who knows? Him talking the powers that be into granting him a township just by passing the gentlemen a jug of whiskey.”

Henry waved him off. “He was just proving a point. They were concerned about the water. His home brew was the proof, and don’t guess getting them soaked hurt any.”

“Either way, it’s a good yarn.”

Even with the two-hour layover, not bad for the first twenty-four hours of his trek, a hundred and sixteen miles. At that rate, he should make it back in the ten days he figured.

As the stage—with a new driver and fresh horses—pulled out of Marshall with the brag of reaching Shreveport by dinner, Henry let his mind wander back to Clarksville.

More specifically, he pondered his home and the beauty who resided in his room awaiting his return.

He thought of his life with Sue, from her riding in wearing her husband’s britches, then all the wonderful memories in-between—that and going through that last delivery with her.

When she passed, his life seemed over; would have been, except for his babies. She’d left him a powerful good reason to live.

Then May waltzed into the Donoho.

He’d considered the importance of her salvation. She was a good woman, moral with integrity. Sue’d definitely thought it highly important, but did he have to? She could come around to receiving the Lord after he married her.

His girls came to mind. Mary Rachel was getting near marrying age. Breathing a heavy sigh, he could hardly think of it, did not relish the prospect. He’d told all his daughters if they wanted his blessing, not to fall in love with a man who didn’t love the Lord.

What kind of example would marrying May be?

Mercy, Lord, show her how much she needs You, soften her heart, make a way for us to be together.



At that exact moment, May sat on the porch in Henry's rocker with the youngest Buckmeyer baby girl on her lap and watched the sky to the northwest. "Looks like rain to me, Miss May."

"I think so, too, but we've been so hot and dry, I suppose we could use a good soaking."

"Mammy says the angels play in the raindrops."

"Is that right, Bonnie?"

"Mm humm, and then they paint the rainbow when it's over."

May leaned back and studied the eight-year-old. "Maybe, I don't know. I've never seen an angel. Have you?"

The girl traced her finger along May's cheek. "No, ma'am, but I think an angel would look a lot like you if I was to see one."

"What a sweet thing to say. Thank you, that's very kind of you."

"Mister Chester told Mammy that you wasn't borned again. Is that right, Miss May? You don't love God and Jesus? I sure want you to be my mother, but daddy can't marry you if you're not saved."

"Did Mammy tell you that?"

"No, ma'am. We were playing hide and seek, and I was under a big stack of sheets, and Mister Chester was helping her boil the wash. He said it. Mammy just kept saying, 'Uh huh. Uh huh. I know dat's right.'"

Bad enough her brother talked to Mammy about her religious state or lack thereof, but if Mammy had gone and told Bonnie something like that, she'd...she'd....

Well, good to know she hadn't, so all she needed to do was read Chester the riot act.

"Do you want to be my mother?"

"I would love that, sweetheart. You're a wonderful little girl. I love you and all your sisters. And Houston, too. Being here with you all has been wonderful."

"I like it, too. So why don't you just ask Jesus to save you? I know He will. He's supposed to love everyone. Then you and Daddy can get married, and you can be my mother, and we'll all live happily ever after." The child sat up and smiled her beautiful, precious little grin. "Just like in your stories. Right?"

"I believe it is." She chuckled. "Sounds great. I sure hope it all works out; I love your daddy something fierce."

"I do to; I hate it when he's gone."

"Me, too."

"We going to have us a real big wedding, aren't we? Rebecca got to be at his and Mama's, but she says it wasn't a great big one. Just her and Mama and Grandpa and Levi and Grandpa's housekeeper and, uh, of course Daddy was there, and Blue Dog. He was Newly's daddy. Did you know Blue Dog?"

May laughed, not so mad anymore at Chester. How could she with the baby in her lap telling all her innocent little stories and asking her piercing naïve questions?

"I didn't know him, Newly's the first dog I met of yours. And you know what? I'd love to have the biggest wedding ever. Would you be want to be my flower girl?"

Bonnie jumped to her feet and clamped. "Oh, yes! Can I? I know how, too. I have to drop petals where you're going to walk because you'll be the bride. If—" She put her hands on her hips and cocked her head. "You get saved."

Then she came close and placed a little hand on each of May's cheeks and peered straight into her eyes. "I'll be your flower girl, and you'll be my mother. May I call you Mama now so I can get used to it?"

Tears brimmed May's eyes. She didn't know what to say. Did everything really hinge on her swallowing Henry's ridiculous beliefs? Could she fake it? That'd be a lie, no way to start a new life.

Placing her hands over Bonnie Claire's, she pulled them around her neck, lifting her onto her lap and into a big hug. "I'd love that, but let's wait and ask your father. See what he has to say."

"Alright, but he'll say yes. I know he will, and that will be wonderful, Mama."

Love caught in her throat and choked her. May pushed the dear one out half an arm's length and pursed her lips.

Bonnie Claire giggled. "I was only practicing."

Another hug ensued, that one bigger and tighter and longer. Laura called her to her studies. The eight-year-old slipped off and skipped inside.

May rocked a while. How could she live without that sweet baby in her life? She closed her eyes and pictured what her and Henry's baby would look like. He sure threw handsome children.

Didn't really matter, she'd take another Houston or Bonnie or any of his offspring. Maybe a girl with her curls. She fluffed her hair. Or maybe not. As much as she loved it, her coiffures proved plenty bothersome, especially on rainy days.

A freshening gust brought her to her feet. The clouds had deepened to a dark grey. No lightning or thunder yet, but the wind sure seemed to be blowing it her way.

She watched for a few minutes then retreated to his library. In spite of the salt in her eyes, maybe she could sling a bit of ink today. Be fun to have a stack of chapters ready for Henry to read on his return.

Halfway through the first page, the rain started. It smelled delicious, clean and fresh like newly cut grass mingled with bath salts.

She loved it. If only he could be here to enjoy it with her. If only....

She set her quill down. She sure hoped she wasn't playing some awful trick on herself. She could not live a lie, but was Bonnie right? Would that be a wedge that drove him apart from her?

Not being able to swallow the myth his first wife leaned on—and obviously drilled into him, he'd loved Sue enough to change. Could she love him that much? Enough to join his church and all that entailed? What could it hurt?

Would May's unbelief keep him from marrying her? Surely it would not.

A flash of lightning lit the room. Booming thunder followed on its heels. Sounded right outside her window. She grinned. It'd be hers, too, soon enough if she had her way.

Small footfalls echoed down the hall. The door flew open, and Houston stared at her only a second before throwing himself into her lap. "Save me, Miss May."

She hugged him tight and kissed his cheek. What was it with these Buckmeyer children and salvation? "How about you saving me?"



Sure pleased Henry that the driver hit his arrival time into Shreveport almost to the minute. But the closer he got to New Orleans, the more he dreaded going back to the city.

He'd been there for, what? Twenty-plus hours with Sue? But he didn't go to The Swamp or anywhere else Bull was known to haunt back then, not that he'd even thought once about his comrade-in-arms during that trip.

Letters hadn't started yet, hadn't known then the man even hunted him.

Shreveport seemed nice enough, found a right tasty beef stew and passable cornbread for dinner, but it wasn't Texas. From then on until he got back across the state line, Levi would have no jurisdiction.

Being a personal friend of Sam Houston held no sway either.

Too soon the stage—that coach a bit fancier without near the sway as the last—headed out, rolling, ever rolling toward the one city he'd rather not ever have to cast a shadow in again.

He made himself not think on New Orleans or that terrible battle or the man who wanted to beat him to a bloody pulp or worse.

Instead, he set his thoughts on what was lovely and pure and worthy of a good report—his May. Still a virgin. He remembered the feel of her hand in his or ever so lightly on his shoulder as he waltzed her around the porch.

For a few heartbeats, instead of leaving her at the stairs, he

danced her all the way to his room, but shook off that image.

She remained forbidden fruit and would be until she accepted God's love, repented of her wicked ways—though he couldn't imagine what those might be—and asked the Lord to save her.

He had to stay strong, for her sake and his babies'. No matter his own happiness, he must be a good example for them.

Oh, Lord, give me the desires of my heart. Or either change them according to Your will. Show me the error of my ways.

Chapter



Twenty-one

About a mile after the last team change before Natchitoches, lightning and rolling thunder brought sheets of cold rain. Henry pulled his window shut, then grinned.

Wondering if the same storm had hit Clarksville, he couldn't help it. His babies sure took advantage of a little weather to sit his lap or snuggle under his covers. No doubt they cuddled with May if it had.

Not rotten by anyone's measure, his children enjoyed their spoiling for sure, but he'd not have it any other way. Could be that was one reason why he found May so attractive.

Someone had spoiled the lady in all the right ways. She'd be good for his babies, especially the girls.

Shortly, all thoughts of his new love vanished as the coach slowed down in the fresh mud. Three times they crawled, and the second day on the road melted into the night.

With the rain still falling, the driver requested help getting unstuck, but finally his bugle sounded in the oldest city in Louisiana.

Instead of a short layover and moonlight dash to Alexandria, the storm forced Henry and his boys to find lodging. The trip put on hold until the roads dried. A bit past midnight, the storm's fury passed.

It left a steady soft drizzle, the kind he loved to watch from his porch rocker. The sun didn't break through until mid morning, but by then, Levi and Jean Paul had booked passage on the Creole, a steamboat that sailed the bayous of Louisiana regular.

"Even loaded, the captain says the side-wheeler should make New Orleans tomorrow evening."

Henry nodded at the man he counted more a son than nephew. Hopefully, his own boy would turn out to be half the man Levi Baylor made.

"Good, thanks."

Once aboard, neither Henry nor the boys took a seat at any of the more than a dozen gambling tables. He knew better, and even though he caught a longing look in Levi's eye, the ranger resisted any urge to try his hand.

Hard to beat the river sharks, no matter the tale told of Jim Bowie winning, then giving away a fortune. Of all the men lost at the Alamo, Henry would have most liked knowing the Kentuckian, if for no other reason than hearing from the man himself, if all the yarns spun about him held any truth.

He'd repeated a few, but mostly just stored them away, waiting for more proof than some dandy writing it down in a newspaper.

Reporters, nothing but a bunch of snoops, the very ones responsible for all this situation with Bull. Well, and him talking to the idiots. Pride, that's what it all boiled down to.

Surely without all the stories written about him and Levi over the years, Bull would have long since forgotten about him. That first letter came when? He pondered.

Not too long after he got back from San Jacinto. Seemed Sue was more proud of seeing his name in the paper than Texas winning her independence from Mexico.

Through that first day on the Creole, he mulled over his past, relived the fights he'd had with Bull. Would he have to kill the man this time?

That night after his prayers, he resolved to do everything possible to avoid taking the man's life, but he'd not sacrifice himself to keep it from happening. A peace settled over him and turned his thoughts to May.

Oh, Lord, soften her heart.

Then, like it was all settled, he dreamed of a life with the novelist.



After the rain cleared the air and brought a welcomed cool breeze that at best turned the heat from horrible to tolerable, May went to furiously writing.

In a frenzy of black on white, she finished two more chapters. When she counted the pages, she could hardly believe it. Was that a record, eighteen pages in two days?

She'd have to ask Chester, he'd know. Where was he anyway? Seemed she hadn't seen her brother much of late. Well, she only needed to locate Mammy's whereabouts, and there he'd be.

Had he found true love, too? For a fact, the man already told her he wasn't leaving Texas unless the former slave went with him.

She loved it. If she stayed, and he'd gone back to New York, losing him would break her heart. She giggled. Would he really stay if she didn't? Could that happen?

Would there be a reason she'd ever head back to New York without Henry? She loved the man, and he loved her. She was

absolutely certain of that.

Only thing necessary was coming to a logical understanding, get him to agree to some sort of treaty over his religion. Then nothing would stand in the way of marital bliss.

The most level-headed man she'd ever encountered would surely compromise with her. What his sweet Bonnie reported couldn't be true. Could it?

The grandfather clock struck its rather loud chime; she counted with it, then on the fifth and last gong, it hit her. He should be in New Orleans by now. The city brought that horrid Captain Orr to mind.

A shudder ran up her spine. What if she had settled?

Had Henry already made it? Had he found Mammy's brother?

She hoped on hope that Bull guy played nice with her sweetheart. Sure found it hard not knowing, more specifically, maddening. She should have insisted he let her go.

The tone of his 'No' and the way he lifted his chin as though that settled everything washed over her. Plopping her elbow on the desk, she propped her chin on her fist.

He shouldn't boss her around. He didn't have the right. She was her own woman, a successful author who'd made her way alone just fine. Exactly. Except, she didn't want to be alone anymore.

More than life, she wanted to be Mis'ess Patrick Henry Buckmeyer. So, was that why she stayed, accepted his decision? Obeyed him?

Obey? Why would she do such a thing?

No man had ordered her around since she was twelve years old, and the commodore breathed his last. Had she done it to prove to Henry that she could be the proper southern wife?

Or to herself maybe?

Had Sue obeyed him?

A part of her screamed inside, don't do it!

But she refused that part.

The bigger part spoke softly of the way his hand felt on her cheek, the twinkle in his eye when he saw her for the first time of a day. That part reminded her of the afternoon by the pond.

Her chin went from on top of her fist to between both hands. Wise and wonderful, Henry was everything she'd ever hoped to find. She wanted the man. Wanted him to totally dominate every part of her, bask in his goodness, his power, and his love.

The remembrance of him coming off The Black and saving Houston from that hog flashed across her mind's eye. Had she ever known a man like Henry?

And charging into the muzzle of that long gun at church. He was right. Running the other way like she'd wanted wouldn't have been

the way to handle the situation.

He could never deny who he was, and beyond all doubt, he was not a coward, but brave and strong. She loved him. She would obey, not because he forced her to, because she wanted to please him in every way.

She would follow him until the day she died.

Knuckles on wood brought her to the now. She wiped her eyes and straightened the growing stack of papers. "Yes?"

The door opened, and Chester walked in. "We're going to the brush arbor after supper. Want to come?"

The no died halfway across her tongue. "Why? Sunday's still two days away."

"Mammy figures the men'll be getting to New Orleans about that time. We want to pray for Mister Henry, him staying safe and coming home with her brother."

"What about the children? I can stay and watch them."

"They're all coming; Wallace and Rebecca, too. Why don't you come? I'll be more comfortable than with you staying here alone."

That word again. Alone. She didn't want to be alone anymore, but without Henry she was alone even in a room full of people. She stared at her brother; he stared right back.

Finally she shook her head. "I'll be fine here. I really don't want to go. Henry will keep himself safe. He doesn't need any help from an imaginary being."

She ignored his smirk and when she held her peace, he left, probably to go help Mammy. May hadn't forgot her plan to surprise the cook. She'd been thinking on it.

Her brother's new love served supper promptly at six, but instead of the normal flow of words punctuated with silverware on porcelain, seemed all thoughts were centered on the next state over.

What bit of conversation that took place beyond 'pass this or hand me that please', was mostly about Henry, Levi or Jean Paul.

Wallace mentioned the storm, and the consensus that it had probably delayed the stagecoach seemed to brighten the overall mood a shade or two. They shouldn't be worried.

Henry could take care of himself just fine.

She watched from the porch as the whole clan, white and black, loaded together in two wagons. Wallace Rusk, driving the second team, nodded toward the house. "Left my pistol on the Colonel's desk if any need arises. You know how to shoot, Miss May?"

If he only knew. "Yes, thank you. I've handled a gun before."

New Blue materialized from under the porch, fell in behind the last wagon, then stopped and turned around. He looked right at her then back to the parade as it rolled away.

For a bit, he sat on his haunches looking from her to them, then finally sauntered back, climbed the steps, and laid down right at her feet. Silly dog rolled his big brown eyes toward her.

“You can go with them if you want. I’ll be fine.”

He lowered his head to his paws and closed his eyes as though the matter had been settled.

With Henry’s mutt at her feet, she rocked the sun below the tree line, then figured maybe she would dirty some more paper, see if she could pen anything worth reading.

At the front door, she half expected New Blue to come in with her, but he never moved, kept at his self-imposed guard post. How had Henry trained him like that?

And the way everyone talked, his sire by far had been the best dog ever. Was Mister Buckmeyer some kind of master manipulator? Dogs, children, strange woman?

Was that what he was doing to her? Killing her with his kindness? Bending her will to his, then...what?

Her imagination made her a living alright, but why, oh why, did she let it run wild like that? Henry was not a deceitful man; he was what he was, so much like....

She stopped in the doorway to his library. No.

Henry wasn’t anything like the commodore. Well, tall like him... and strong. Oh, how many times had her mother’s husband tossed her so high she giggled at the sensation of flying?

Then he’d catch her like she didn’t weigh any more than a feather. Smart, both men were smart, but the commodore was....

Devious came to mind, but maybe cunning described him better.

Now she’d heard several reports of Henry being the best horse trader around, and how he bought Jean Paul and Mammy then all their kin and emancipated the whole lot.

The commodore, on the other hand, bragged on being a master – a slaver through and through just like his daddy the Captain before him and his father the Admiral before him.

Her family built Sea Side on black backs; he’d said it more than once, and as a boast of sorts. She stepped on into the library then froze.

Wallace’s pistol rested smack dab in the middle of the desk right on top of her stack of papers. Her heart beat faster. She should just turn around and go back to the porch.

She could take Henry’s Black to the brush arbor. He’d taught her how to saddle. Bosh, she was being silly. Just pick it up and move it. No problem, right? Then why did her insides shake?

It wasn’t the commodore’s pistol. Chester had buried that one. She slipped around and flopped into Henry’s chair. One finger and a

thumb on cold steel, and twenty-nine years melted away.

She closed her eyes and stood in the doorway to her parent's bedroom again. The man she'd always counted as her daddy, held her mother up by her hair, slapping her hard across her face then backhanding the other cheek.

"Stop! Stop it!" She lifted his pistol and pointed it at him, steadied it with her left hand, exactly like he had taught her. "Stop hitting her!"

The weapon exploded. The flash blinded her.

She jerked in Henry's chair, and a black powder stench burned her nose.

A scream—just as one had sounded that day so long ago.

She opened her eyes. Her ears still reverberated, and her heart thrashed against her chest. She placed the weapon on the desk's corner and rested her head on her forearm next to it.

"Henry, my Henry."

He could never know.



The steamboat's thrum changed. Henry set his fork down and looked around. "You feel that?"

Levi followed his gaze. "Yes, sir, what is it?"

Listening a bit first, he nodded. Of course. "We must be getting close. Captain's slowing the paddle down. Once he gets it stopped, he'll reverse her. We'll dock soon enough. Eat up."

About a mile out, movement on shore caught his attention. The lanterns' light bathed the dock and shadowed the countless bodies in motion. Same old wharf.

Place hadn't changed much since he and Sue had brought her cotton there twelve years ago. He smiled at the memory. Oh, how he had loved the woman. No one would ever compare.

But that trip needed to remain in his past. He'd come on a different mission this time. Efforts to buy Mammy's brother set the events in motion. Hopefully it'd end without him having to kill another man.

Pride, being so full of himself back then; that's what had come home to roost. Pride goes before a fall, scripture says it does. And he fell alright, more than once. But got himself back up every time, and.

...

"Mister Henry, sir?"

He turned. "Jean Paul, find out anything?"

"Yes, sir, the purser says we can stay in our rooms until noon tomorrow at no extra charge. They've got to take on wood. Said it's

liable to be days before they can book enough passengers and load enough cargo to go up river again.”

Henry nodded at the news, figured as much. “While you’re locating Glover, Levi and I will work on securing a return berth.”

“Yes, sir.” The younger man turned to the rail and watched as the pilot maneuvered the side-wheeler into proper position. Shortly, with hardly a noticeable bump, the Creole docked.

Slaves on shore and river men aboard worked feverishly to secure the steamboat to the massive piers and making safe the means to get from ship to shore over the great Mississippi.

Soon, two wide gangplanks offered tenable safe passage from the riverboat to land without getting wet. Those with somewhere to go hurried off, laden with carpet bags, hat boxes, and various and sundry personal goods.

The dudes in beaver pelt top hats and fancy waistcoats over checkered britches amused Henry the most. Had any of them worked a day in their lives? A few of the ladies, dressed to the nines, acted almost as comical as their men.

But most of the passengers were just ordinary folks like him. While he watched from the top rail, the movement and buzz of the mass of humanity melded into a blur, replaced by a horrid sense of doom.

Had he come back to New Orleans only to meet his demise? He’d cheated death so many times since that first horrible day when the Redcoats charged Jackson’s bulwarks.

Had the devil demanded his due, and his sins finally found him out?

Chapter



Twenty-two

A bark opened May's eyes. She rose up from off Henry's desk. A haze hung in his library. Was something on fire? She sniffed. Gun smoke? Had sanity left her?

Another bark sounded closer. Newly Blue. Was that him? She remembered him staying, but what was he yapping about?

In a sleep grog, she didn't want to think about it and laid her head back down on the desk. Should go get in Henry's bed. She wanted him home and didn't ever want to be separated from him again.

Could he have really stopped the commodore? Was her love that much of a man?

It all swirled together, her mother in her deathbed, telling her about her real father, mixed with that most horrible of days. She squinted her eyes shut, willing the images away.

Heavy boots pounded on the porch, trace chains rattled, children chattered, then the front door opened and more footfalls fell outside in the hall. May sat upright, straightened her back, and told her lips to smile, but they didn't seem to obey.

Captain Rusk burst in, looked around a little frantically, then stared right at her. Shortly, he filled his lungs then smiled. "You fine, Miss May?"

She nodded then decided to lie. "Yes. I must have fallen asleep." She stretched. "My goodness, Wallace, what is it?"

He walked to the side of the desk, picked up his pistol, sniffed the barrel then turned a full circle looking everything over, but she had no idea what he could be looking for. He didn't answer her.

"Wallace? Why are you back so early? What caused you to barge in here like a ruffian?"

Stepping toward the far wall, he spoke. "Newly came got us." He made his way to the place where Henry and Sue's picture had hung and stuck his finger in a hole there, staring at it.

Where did that hole come from? She didn't remember seeing it before.

He faced her. "Accident?" He still had the gun in his hand.

Had she fired the thing?

Chester burst into the room with Mammy and the other ladies right behind her.

“What happened, May? Why did you shoot the pistol?”

She looked from her brother to the ranger. Her bottom lip quivered. Had she shot the commodore all over again? Tears welled. Someone sobbed.

It was her.

Then the dam burst, and tears flowed down her cheeks. She couldn't stop weeping, had no control. Strong arms engulfed her, just like that day so long ago.

Chester hugged her tight and whispered in her ear. “It'll be alright, baby girl, I'll fix everything.”



“He's going to the cock fights tonight; in a big barn just past The Market, right on the river.”

Henry nodded, sounded like Glover. “Is your uncle going with him?”

“Yes, sir. He said Mister Bull hasn't let him out of his sight since he bought him.”

Henry turned, grasped the top rail with both hands, and leaned back. “You seen Levi?”

“No, sir.”

“Is the dining room open?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Let's wait for him there.”

The Creole wasn't the grandest steamer on the river, but nice enough. Food tasted better than passable, but compared to Mammy's cooking, fell woefully short.

Then again, so did everyone's everywhere. He only picked at the fish he'd ordered. The rock in his gut didn't leave much room for food.

He hated it being his fault, him and his big mouth. Why was he so stupid back then? Just didn't see any way to beat the devil around the stump on this one.

Oh, Lord, make my crooked paths straight, blot out my sins. Keep me from spilling more blood. But Lord, if I have to, if he gives me no choice, keep me safe and sound.

He rubbed his left arm, still sore, but not too bad.

Jean Paul didn't seem to have any trouble with his gumbo and fried rice. Normally, Henry would have been right there with him, but the thought of spicy only seemed to grow the rock.

Halfway through dessert, a nice looking cobbler he couldn't bring

himself to put another bite of into his mouth, Levi strolled in like just another day had dawned, and the coming evening held no malice.

“We can sail noon tomorrow if we want, the Louisiana has plenty of open berths, and if we should have to stay over a day, there’s no less than three heading up river then.”

“Excellent, Glover and Jean Paul’s uncle are going to the cock fights tonight. Hopefully, he will see his way clear to trade.”

Levi nodded toward a waiter as he neared. “A bowl of that gumbo when you get a chance.” The ranger wolfed his soup down like it might be his last meal.

Oh, Lord, don’t let anything happen to Levi.

The thought sent a shudder down Henry’s spine. He’d gone to war more for the boy’s sake more than Houston’s or Texas’.

Sue and Rebecca had been beside themselves when Levi announced he would join up with Houston once word of the Alamo massacre reached Clarksville. Then on the way, finding Wallace....

What a Godsend that boy had been.

Oh, Lord, if one of us has to die tonight, let it be me instead of Levi.

Why was he being so morose? If anyone died that evening, it would be Bull Glover.

Too soon, the lanterns and gas lights cast the city in hues of pale yellow and grey. Time to beard the lion, or some such nonsense, exactly what did that saying mean?

Didn’t matter, what did was getting Mammy’s brother back to Texas and settling once and for all the festering offense Glover carried.

Quarter mile past The Market, Jean Paul pointed to a big tin-roofed building. A steady stream of men with a few ladies hurried to its lantern-lit double front doors. “Looks like we found the place.”

“I believe you’re right.” Levi stepped in front like he’d assigned himself point.

Henry let him; Glover had no quarrel with the ranger.

Inside, a mass of humanity crowded around a knee-high wall with two gamecocks circling each other in the cockpit. First look, he didn’t spot his one time friend, then he caught his eye.

Even in the dim light and through the wrinkles, he’d never forget that stare.

With each feign and dodge, the crowd groaned and jeered or moaned or cheered at the world’s oldest spectator sport. Finally, the combatants, combs and wattles cut off to remove vulnerabilities, engaged for real.

Feathers flew. The bigger fowl raked the small bird with his bone spurs, but little man struck back with his iron spikes.

Big boy fluttered then faltered. A black man jumped the wall and

retrieved the beaten rooster before the smaller cock could strike a death blow.

Groans and cheers were followed by demands for payment of lost wagers. It surprised Henry that so many ladies attended, but why would the blood lust only infect the male of the species?

Apparently it didn't.

Glover pushed past the man next to the ring and stepped over the short wall. He pointed right at Henry's nose then cupped both hands around his mouth.

"People." Then even louder. "Folks!" His booming voice quieted most. "Check out the big gun! Patrick Henry Buckmeyer in the flesh, next Governor of Texas if the papers have their way. What took you so long, boy? Didn't you get any of my letters?"

"Hello, Bull. Got here fast as I could, once I heard you'd acquired something I want."

The toady nodded, glanced over his shoulder at Jean Paul's uncle, then squared on Henry. "What's so special about my nigger?"

Jean Paul stepped forward. "He's my uncle."

"So, Patty Boy—except I heard you go by Henry now—what's the matter, son? Didn't like the name we gave you?" Bull glanced at Jean Paul then back to Henry. "Now I'll admit it is touching. You wanting to buy your house nigger's kin. Very noble of you, Patty Boy. That your bed warmer?"

A few laughed, more groaned, and the ones behind Glover pushed back and to both sides out of the line of fire. Henry wanted to put a mini ball in the man's mouth and shut him up.

But that wouldn't get him what he wanted. Bless God, he'd learned a long time ago to keep his wits around such blowhards. "How much you want for your man there, Bull?"

"What I want, Patty, is to settle things between us. I want you to step over that wall. We'll finish what you started in '14."

"And what if I do step over, then what?"

"If you survive, he's yours for the twelve hundred I gave for him."

Henry glanced around. "Who's place is this?"

An older man stepped forward. "Mine, name's Bastrop Elrod."

"Any objections?"

"None from me. You two want to go at it, be my guests. I would like a few minutes to book a few bets if you don't mind."

"Fine then, Bull. I'll fight you if that's what it takes. Write out a bill of sale and give it to Elrod there, and once this is over, we'll give him your coin."

"Good." Bull shed his coat and went to unbuttoning his shirt.

"Been waiting a long time for this, Patty Boy."



After three ruined pieces of innocent, lily white paper lay crumpled littering the floor, May gave up flinging any more ink. She wanted to go somewhere and hide, but where?

On one hand, she wanted Henry home, but on the other, dreaded his return. Within seconds no doubt, someone would surely whisper in his ear that he couldn't marry her; that she was a crazy lady; that she shot Wallace's pistol at the wall—right where their mother's picture had hung.

Once more, the commodore would have ruined her life.

She hated him, but she loved him, too, which nauseated her a bit. How could she love such an awful human being?

Her brain tried to remember all the good times and accuse her for shooting him dead, make her out to be the deranged one. Maybe she should have shot herself that day, not him.

A light rap preceded the library door swinging open, and Chester strolled in holding two steaming cups. "Want to sit on the porch? Mammy made us hot toddies."

She held her hand out. "No, I couldn't abide seeing anyone. They all surely think I've lost my mind."

He set the mug on the desk then settled into the right hand wingback. "No one is going to say anything, May. They all know it was an accident."

"No they don't, they think I'm crazy. I saw the looks on their faces." She glanced toward the sabotaged lighter space on the wall.

A single tear rolled down her cheek. "And of course, I shot right where Sue's picture had been hanging all those years. The only way it could be any worse is if Henry hadn't taken it down, and I'd shattered the thing."

"How about I explain –"

"No. Don't you dare! I'd rather them think I'm crazy than know I can't stop myself from killing the commodore every few years."

"You only have to get it through that thick skull of yours that the act was self defense."

"But it wasn't."

Chester's head bobbed up and down slightly. He looked off for a bit then back. "Yes, May, it was."

"He would never have hurt me. He loved me."

He grimaced then showed his pearly whites. "You remember that quadroon the commodore called Honey Pie?"

"Yes." She shook her head, didn't like to think about those days, much less the pretty slaves her mother hated so much. "What about her?"

“He didn’t sell her.”

“What?” She quickly flipped through her memories and confirmed what she’d thought. “Yes, he did. I remember. Mother was so happy about it. I recall perfectly the evening he told her. Mama hated Miss Honey Pie.”

“No, that’s just what he told her. We knew—the house and field slaves. We all knew.”

“What exactly did you all know?”

“Honey Pie got uppity on him, and he beat her to death.”

She gasped. “What? No! Who told you that?”

“Our father, the day he got sold off. He warned me never to cross the commodore, or he’d kill me, too. If the monster had known for certain what he only suspected, Pa would not have been sold off, and we’d be orphans.”

“But...but.... Why haven’t you ever told me this before?”

“To what end, May?” He shrugged. “We’ve not talked much about those days. I saw no reason to bring it up. But baby girl, I’m telling you now, and I’m telling you true.

“He’d would have killed your mother for a fact. And for what? Getting between him and me that day? You know that’s exactly correct if you’d only let yourself accept it.”

Chester shook his head. “No one did that to him and lived to tell about it.”

She took a sip of toddy then leaned back in Henry’s chair. Why hadn’t he told her all this before? Did it make any difference? The string of light-skinned slaves who never did any work was no secret.

That the commodore kept them for their beauty alone, she was confident, but beating to death the one he prized most? But Chester wouldn’t lie about such a thing. She believed that.

What kind of fiend had she loved all these years?

Leaning forward, she gulped a goodly draught of the brew.

“Where’s the bottle?”

“You don’t need inebriation. It helps nothing. You need to believe the truth and forgive yourself.”

She curled her lip and spat her words. “You do not know what I need, so don’t be acting as though you’re so smart.”

“Oh, but yes I do, my darling. You most assuredly need the Lord, not a bottle of whiskey.”

Chapter



Twenty-three

That night while she fought to find sleep, May wrestled with the truth her brother had painted. Was the commodore a monster, and she righteous for saving them all from him?

Against her will, the days after his death played out, scrutinized her life at Sea Side. She recoiled in distaste. Oh, how weary she was of living a lie for the past twenty-nine years.

Could it be true? Could she be the victim of the white savage instead of his murderer?

Sometime between the clock chiming two and three, she dozed fitfully. Instead of any respite though, she dream-walked into her childhood home once more, her heart hardened for the years.

But where fearful dread had once existed, a sweet peace engulfed her. No doubt remained. Her father's father was a monster, and her saving her mother's life didn't mean she was.

Other than that one horrible day, she'd never harmed another human being and never harbored any desire to force her will on anyone by violence. At last, she knew the truth.

What exactly caused her to pull the trigger that night? Love for her mother? Her poor mother, married to such an evil fiend. Who could blame her for turning toward a forbidden love with handsome, young Silas?

Had the commodore known?

Maybe the look on his face when she hollered for him to stop caused her to fire. Had she known all along in the recesses of her soul what he really was?

The pure hate, meanness, out of his mind rage in his expression told it all. Destroying him before he killed her mother—it was May's only choice. The hardness in her chest melted away.

But in essence, he'd killed her mother anyway. She never recovered from the day, even though it took her months of ghastly suffering to die.

A miniature hand on her cheek pulled her from her dreams. "Mama?"

She pried one eye open. Houston grinned at her. "Morning, sweetheart."

"Mammy says you should get up, you done missed breakfast, and you's about to miss dinner, too."

May resisted the urge to correct his grammar—or that he called her Mama. Actually, she loved the sound of it, but would the boy's father really make it so? "What time is it?"

He shrugged. "Pert near dinner time. Uncle Wallace done called us to wash up." He held his hands out. "See?"

"Yes, sir." She sat up and inspected them. "You got them nice and clean. So did Mammy send you?"

"No, ma'am. Me and Bonnie figured I should come get you."

She scooted up in bed. "What is everyone saying about yesterday?"

"Mean about you shooting the Captain's pistol?"

She hated pumping the boy for information, but so much more wanted to know if she should show her face. She nodded. "Yes, that."

"Not much."

"Is everyone mad at me?"

"Naw, Uncle Chester said you was having a moon day. That's all."

"That's all?"

"Yes, ma'am, except for Mammy says sometimes womens get a little crazy." The five-year-old screwed up his face and glanced toward the ceiling as though deep in working a puzzle out. "Mama May, what's a moon day? 'Cause I ain't never had one."

"You just take my word for it, you don't want to. They're no fun, believe me." She kissed the boy on the cheek then sent him packing. Shortly she strolled out, might as well get it over with.

Either way, sooner or later, she had to face the music.

Normalcy reigned outside Henry's library. Well, Chester acted a bit too nice, but she paid him no never mind. No embarrassing questions popped up all through dinner, then after a short pile of ruined pages, May joined the older girls for their Saturday bath.

She loved the big wooden tub and how her ingenious Henry had plumbed the thing. And the whole house for that matter.

Who would ever guess water closets existed in the backwoods of Texas?

Patrick Henry Buckmeyer. She'd never met another like him anywhere; traveling how many miles to buy a slave he intended on setting free from the first. "What makes him do that?"

"What was that, Miss May?"

She looked across the water. Mary Rachel grinned at her. "What was what, dear?"

"Just now. You asked 'what makes him do that'." The girl smiled.

“What makes who do what?”

“Oh, I guess I asked it aloud. Didn’t mean to.” She laughed. “I was thinking about your father, him going all the way to New Orleans to buy Mammy’s brother, only to set him free.”

Rose piped up. “I think it’s because he just cannot help being wonderful.”

Rebecca leaned back, looked at her best friend then shrugged. “He definitely is an amazing man, but still, we’ve wondered the same thing.”

“Any conclusions?”

The man’s oldest daughter shook her head. “It’s a conundrum; he’s the sweetest human being on earth. You ought to have seen him with Blue Dog’s first litter. You’d have thought he was the grandpa or something. But when that wolf inside—or whatever it is he keeps chained up—gets loose....”

She fell silent, and Rose took over. “That look in his eyes just before he’s about to go berserk....” She pushed waves across the still water as though she played alone a million miles away.

The remembrance obviously sent both young women off to some faraway place.

Rebecca shook her head and returned to the bathhouse. “First time I saw it, I was only nine. This thief had a knife to Mama’s throat.” She laughed. “I wanted Daddy to blow Littlejohn’s head off. The toady had already hurt me, kicked me halfway across camp, and he was about to hurt her.”

Rose nodded. “You’ve seen it, Miss May, when Frank pointed that long gun at him that day at church. Remember? He charged in and would have beaten the man to death if Levi hadn’t pulled him off.”

“I do remember.” Her voice cracked; she cleared her throat then smiled. “I got so mad at him over that. I wanted him to run the other way, but of course he couldn’t.”

“No.”

“I’ve since realized that would have been the wrong way to handle such a situation. And after I thought about it, I really couldn’t say that I’d want him to change one bit.”

“Anyway, we think maybe he’s trying to balance the scales.” Rose twisted an errant red curl and pushed it into the pile pinned on top of her head. “You know, because he’s killed so many men.”

Rebecca shook her head. “Not ever anyone who didn’t need killing, but Mama said sometimes, they would trouble him terrible late of a night. That their ghosts haunted his dreams.”

Rose held her hands up. “Oh ladies, the battles Levi has fought in his dreams!”

Rebecca chuckled. “So what you’re telling me is that I shouldn’t

let Wallace sleep any at all.”

Giggles aplenty filled the warm room. Every time the mirth quieted, Rose would raise a knowing eyebrow and give them a little smirk.

A twinge of jealousy bit May, but then the conversation turned to Rebecca and her ranger’s coming nuptials. No one mentioned one word about the hole in Henry’s library wall.

Or a double wedding either.

May would love nothing better, except on the other side of the page, she didn’t want to wait until December. The way she looked at it, she’d already waited too long to be a bride.

Henry needed to get himself home. She needed to get things settled with him. She wanted to marry him that very day.

Like always, the last day of the week turned into the first. She didn’t really want to go to church, but didn’t see a way out. Shooting Henry’s wall needed to be the only black mark against her when he got home.

And if Charley was right, CeCe would be more than eager to give her father a full report.

She needed to spend some time with that girl, hopefully she’d get to spend a lot of time with all the little Buckmeyer ladies—and their father. And of course, his adorable little man Houston.

Rainy nights might be the best, having the little darling snuggled in between her and his daddy. Even throwing CeCe in wouldn’t spoil the party.

The service dragged on, but it was nice when the cantor—was that what they called him? Didn’t seem right. Anyway, when the leader of the church asked everyone to pray for Henry and the boys’ safe and successful return, a nice feeling washed over her.

Being part of something bigger than herself, she liked that.

Maybe that caused so many Christians to buy into the fairytale; a way to bond together, like being in the army or some social club. God was good, and the church people could put all the bad in the world off on the devil.

Could that be it? Could it really be so simple?

That evening she managed to get two pages worth keeping, but it cost her ten marred ones. And her favorite quill pen. She hated that. Never in all her days as a mistress of the ink had she not been able to tell the tale.

Especially once she got it going and brought her characters to life. Wouldn’t that be fun? Living in the world she’d created with all her fictitious friends? Except that was the problem.

The heroes of her novels, she knew exactly how to handle. Henry posed another matter indeed. The man was real and held her heart in

his grasp. And she had to write about him loving Sue.

Arrrugghhh. She never should have agreed to this.

What if he didn't approve? The pressure to get it right kept making her wad pages, and her gaffes littered the floor. If Henry Buckmeyer didn't get himself home—and soon—she might truly go crazy.

She needed him for so many reasons. She loved him. Oh, how she loved the man and hated the separation.

Why hadn't he let her go with him?

Out on the porch, sipping her hot toddy, she pondered that question until time for bed. A darkness hovered over New Orleans, she'd felt it in her bones. Henry shouldn't have gone at all, but at least Levi insisted on accompanying him.

A better man to have your back never existed, least wise that's what Wallace claimed. The Ranger had the steadiest aim, could smell danger a mile off, and never lost his head no matter what.

The instant her curls hit the feather pillow, a chill washed over her heart. Was that why he wouldn't hear of her going? Did he leave her knowing he was coming back in a wooden box?

Oh no.

She closed her eyes.

Is that it, God? You are not good, but some sick monster who torments little girls? Let them think they're happy only to pull the rug out from under them? Then keep on and on knocking them down every time they find love?

No, that can't be God. Henry said God was love.

Hello? Are You listening out there? Are You really even out there at all? Is my love safe? Is he on his way home? Can you really watch over someone and actually keep them safe?

If you can, why did you let me kill the commodore? And then let my mother die anyway? She was so young. And Sue, why did she have to die?

May rolled over and buried her face in the cotton case. She didn't want Sue alive. Was that bad? Who could wish for those precious little girls to grow up without their mother?

Maybe she really was a monster after all. But didn't Sue's death—and her own mother's—just prove there couldn't be a loving God out there? The world harbored too much evil.

If she were in charge, no little girl would ever have to go through losing their mother. But what about that rumbling in her gut? Would the little Buckmeyer girls be orphaned completely?

No. She was just being ridiculous.

Henry was fine. He'd be home with Mammy's brother within the week. Five more days, or even less. He might even arrive in four.

He could find himself a real fast stallion and do the last hundred miles riding through the night just to get home to her a day early.

Then logic trumped wishful thinking.

A single horse couldn't outrun a stage, changing teams every ten miles or so. No. She was being silly. But she hated the premonition that swathed her heart like the linen sheets draped over the furniture to close Sea Side.

What about her love story?

Was Henry's God about to close the book?

Monday, the ninth day of September, a good day. While Fillmore and Congress argued over Texas' northern border, she knocked out five pages slick as anything. With only three false starts.

Good thing Chester kept plenty of ink, parchment, and quills. But why wouldn't he? Her stories and his astute money management had kept them both from hard labor.

That evening she invited him and Mammy out on the porch for a nightcap. Halfway through her new favorite drink, she rocked out and stopped. "Think we've got enough gold coin to buy back Sea Side?"

"No."

"How much more do we need? And is there a deadline on our option?"

Her brother looked off, sipped his drink, then turned back. But he didn't answer, only shook his head.

"What's wrong, Chester?"

"We don't have an option, and last I heard, Sea Side isn't for sale."

"Then why did you tell me we did?"

"You were...." He shrugged.

"What, what was I?"

Mammy stood. "I best go see to my babies."

May waited until the footfalls died then glared at her brother. "Why did you lie to me, Chester?"

"I didn't lie. I just didn't tell you everything. We didn't have two coins to rub together. If you'll remember, you gambled away all the money we got from selling Sea Side."

"That couldn't have made a difference."

"Oh, it couldn't? Didn't you ever wonder how we lived that year before I sold your first novel?"

Could she remember? Had she wondered?

"I don't know. We were living in that horrible little loft, and you were gone most days. I suppose I thought you might be working. So tell me anyway. How did we live?"

"I sold the option."

"You what? But it wasn't yours to sell. I'm the one who...." An ugly thought danced across her heart. She really shouldn't have

inherited Sea Side either. "I'm sorry. You've taken such good care of me all these years. Don't you want to get Sea Side back?"

He chuckled. "Wouldn't that be something? But no, not really. Texas isn't bad, nothing like the deep south. A freeman of color couldn't make it there, but I like it fine right here."

"You and Mammy jumping the broom?" She tried to keep a straight face, but the grin had its way with her lips.

"No, we'll be married in a church—just like you and Mister Henry once you come to your senses."

"I don't know about that, but what I do know is that I do definitely want Sea Side back."

"Why in the world, Millicent May Meriwether?"

"I want to burn his grand house to the ground with his bones in it."

"Oh, baby girl, don't be thinking that. 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.'"

She stood, gulped down the last of her drink and handed the cup to Chester. "I hear the words, but they don't work for me. I'm sorry, but laying it all off on some imaginary deity to settle all scores at some distant point in the future is not logical."

"May –"

"No." She shook her head. "I want to wipe the slate clean with Commodore Meriwether, and burning his pride and joy to the ground with his remains in it would be pure poetic justice. Why should God care anyway?"

Chapter

Twenty-four

“Uncle, wake up.”

Henry forced his left eye to open. It only managed half staff. Levi stood by his bed, holding a steaming cup of coffee. “Mercy, son, what time is it?” He scooted up and reached for the offering.

His arm screamed no, but he ignored the protest.

“A bit after ten.”

“Wednesday, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

He took a sip. “We still making good time?”

Levi grinned. “Yes, sir.” He nodded toward the door. “Might want to visit the water closet, sir. They’ll be here with your bath shortly.”

“Bath?”

“Yes, sir. Then the barber. And I even found a doctor on board. Maybe he can do something about that eye.”

“Do I look that bad?”

“Afraid so. One look and the ladies will run the other direction.”

Henry knew better, but a hot bath did sound good. “No breakfast in bed?”

“No, sir, but I can get that if you want.”

He waved him out then forced his body to roll out of the sack. Everything but his toenails hurt. They probably did, too, and just couldn’t scream loud enough for him to notice.

Mercy, Lord, give me the wisdom to never get into another fight in all my born days. I’m getting too old.

An image of May danced across his heart, and for a brief respite, his aches and pains stepped back and let his new love fill his soul. Not too old to hold that beautiful woman.

He chuckled at himself.

Dear Lord, soften her heart, draw her to you.

A peace settled over him. Soon, real soon, she would accept the Lord’s salvation.

Soaking in the hot water helped some, actually more than he anticipated, but the doctor didn’t offer much, other than clean

bandages and a better wrap job on his broken ribs.

A nice enough man, seemed to know his business—not that Henry had used many healers in the past.

The new side-wheel E. D. White made good time from New Orleans to Jefferson, but apparently a little too quick to do much mending. Then Henry had no choice but to leave the comfort of the steamboat for the stage. Each bump and sway inflicted more pain, but no matter how much the other three tried, he refused to stop.

Wouldn't hear of laying over for even a night, much less a few days. He wanted to be home, in his bed.

And more than even his babies, he wanted to see May. A fever burned in his chest, but he could make it home. He'd take it easy and recuperate there. Home where his heart was, May held it in her own.



A black wall of clouds blew closer. Lightning danced a prelude to its booming thunder that rolled in Thursday evening, the tenth day he'd been gone. May watched the show from the front porch. At first, it only sprinkled.

The welcomed cool breeze reminded her of a spring shower in Central Park. Then someone opened the spigot, and the deluge pounded the earth, turned the children's marble ring into black mud.

She hurried to Henry's office. The sight of the growing stack of pages pleased her some, but would he like them? Had she captured the real Sue? Could she ever?

Seemed to May the lady he remembered was way too perfect. A heroine needed faults for readers to be able to identify with her....

For certain she didn't have to rely on his memory to know how beautiful Sue had been. One look at Rebecca told that tale.

Boiling thunder rumbled the prairie and shook the house. The door burst open. Houston raced through the library all the way to his father's bed with Bonnie hot on his heels.

"Hey, you two, I'm out here."

"You need to be in here with us. Come on to bed now!" Houston's normal tenor pierced her nerves, sounding at least an octave higher, though it held no terror.

Got her to thinking though; perhaps the two littlest Buckmeyers enjoyed using storms for their own purposes. Well, she could play that game.

Soon the tickling turned into "Tell us a story, Mama." Neither added a May behind, and she loved that. Would the other children readily accept her as their mother?

Even though the oldest, Mary Rachel genuinely liked her, maybe

even loved.... Gwendolyn bared her heart at every opportunity. May smiled, shouldn't be too hard to win her over.

Seemed Cecelia might be her hard case. That she ran to tattle on May for sitting her daddy's rocker proved troubling, but to her way of thinking, the girl displayed a deep longing for something missing in her life.

Could it be she wanted a mother more than all the rest? And if that were the case, would she allow May to fill that empty hole in her heart?

She sat up and snuggled Houston on her right with his sister on the left. "Once upon a time." She started as most children's stories did, but decided to make it about the children. "Bonnie and Houston hid under the porch."

Bonnie sat up, her mouth gaped open. "Us? Me and my brother? You going to tell a story about us?"

"Is that fine?"

"Yes, ma'am. We'll like it." Houston elbowed her. "How about when the Comanche attacked, but instead of Charley, make me the one that plugs the last one."

"No." Bonnie reached for her brother, fingers poised to pinch, but the boy dodged her little claw. "I don't want any Indians in our story." He shot her his wrinkled-up face, but didn't argue.

"I was thinking a mystery. Say, while you two are under the porch you find something."

"A treasure chest! Can it be pirates' booty? I love them one-eyed guys."

"Yeah, I like swashbucklers, too. A little. Lots better than Indians anyway. Besides, they're probably long gone and forgot all about the jewels they buried under our porch. Can there be jewels, Mama? I love emeralds!"

For the next few minutes, while the storm raged outside, May spun a lively yarn about buried treasure under the porch. Even worked Newly Blue in. The children laughed at her name for him.

But once the rain softened, she slowed and lowered her voice. The story dulled a bit, and soon both her babies made happy little sleep sounds cuddled tight against her.

Nestling between them with a hand on each precious child, she thought of all the time she'd wasted. She loved the role motherhood afforded. And they enjoyed her story, too. Pirates indeed.

Sure, it had some holes that needed work, but maybe she'd try her hand spinning a few yarns for the younger set.

Perhaps Chester could drum up some interest from her publisher, or one of the other houses if he found a better deal on The Granger. Who knew? She sure didn't.

To her, publishing remained a mystery. Hopefully she would need a rather large cache of children's stories once she and her babies' father were married.

Babies. That night she dreamed of the little ones; Henry's brood, and one of her own. A shout pulled her out of her dream. What was that? She sat up. Who was it? The children snoozed on.

The commotion came from out front. Men hollering, horses snorting. She jumped up and threw her house coat on.

Should she take the pistol?

No, Wallace had taken that back.

She found the matches, lit the lamp, then headed toward the front door.

One voice sounded familiar. Was that Henry? Could it be? Had they traveled through that awful storm?

Just outside the library, the man stumbled toward her with an arm over Levi and Jean Paul's shoulders; all three dripping wet. A fourth man, had to be Mammy's brother, hung back, looking lost.

"Henry! What in the world?"

The man grimaced. "Sore ribs, my bed clear?"

"The little ones are in there. Bonnie and Houston." She turned, hurried back to his bedroom, and pulled Bonnie up into her arms. The girl blinked a few times then laid her head on May's shoulder.

The littlest Buckmeyer slept on the far side and didn't budge. She hurried to get out of the way.

The men eased Henry to the chair by the bed then gently lowered him into it. His face, still swollen and discolored with dark purple and blue bruises, hurt her heart.

"What happened?"

Levi ignored her, and went to pulling off Henry's muddy boots.

Petticoats rustled. "Lord, have mercy. Oh, Mister Henry, what have you gone and done?" Mammy pulled Jean Paul back and leaned in. "Brother said you had to fight Mister Bull, is that right?"

He nodded.

She stood up. "Jean Paul, gets little Houston and carry him upstairs, and the rest of you scat. Let me help Mister Henry into some dry clothes and to bed."

May hated leaving, but it wouldn't be proper for her to undress him, and she didn't know anything about doctoring. Out in the hall, Rebecca took Bonnie, who still hadn't awakened.

Once the two little ones were back in their own rooms, the adults congregated in the kitchen.

Someone, probably Chester, had already kindled a fire in the stove and put a pot of coffee on. At the far end of the table next to Jean Paul, his uncle stared at a spot right in front of him.

Poor man probably blamed himself. He couldn't know Henry would have moved heaven and earth to set the slave free—for Mammy's sake alone.

Soon as he came down all changed and dry, Rose snuggled next to Levi with what looked like a mixture of relief and concern. No one spoke, not even the normally talkative Wallace Rusk.

Before the coffee boiled, Mammy hustled into the room. "Mister Henry has got hisself three broke ribs."

May winced. "Oh, my goodness, but he'll heal all right?"

Ignoring her question, the old cook glared at Levi then her son. "You two should have hog tied him and made him wait in New Orleans. Or at least Jefferson 'til he was better."

"Now, Ma, you know good enough –"

"Eh, eh, eh." She wagged her finger at her son. "Could have killed his fool self. A hundred miles in a rough stagecoach then riding that stallion on home in a rain storm? Why didn't you bed him down at the Donoho and wait 'til morning at the least? I ought to skin the both of you."

Mammy's brother looked up. "Easy now, Sissy. These men tried. Both of them put up good arguments, but Mister Henry? I 'spect he don't never take kindly to being told what he can do and what he cain't do."

She turned her glare on her brother, then went to him and hugged his head and chest from behind. "You are a sight for these old eyes, Big Hoss." After a bit, she faced May.

"He ask for you, darlin' pie. I got him all tucked in. It'll be alright. Go to him."

She jumped up and hurried to his room. He sat in bed propped up on the exact same pillows she'd slept on not thirty minutes before.

"I made it." He smiled. "Ten days, just like I said."

She ignored the wet seat and pulled the chair up next to the bed. "You should have stayed there, my love. Healed up some before making that awful trip in your condition."

He shook his head. "Not an option."

"Why in the world not? What if you'd gotten an infection?"

"You, my babies. I hated going, but I would have hated staying away another day even more."

May loved it that he'd named her first, that he couldn't stand being apart any more than she could. But that only made him taking off without her worse.

"Why'd you let that man goad you into a fight?"

He chuckled then grimaced and grabbed his chest. "It was the other way around."

"You picked a fight with him?"

He nodded. "Back in '14.... Now if I tell you this story, it cannot find its way into one of your books."

She nodded. She had plenty of tales herself that would never go on a written page, and she figured sooner or later she'd have to tell him. "I'll not breathe a word to anyone."

He exhaled then sucked in another breath through clinched teeth. "The Brits had landed, but instead of attacking, they waited."

"This is in New Orleans, right?"

"Yes, downriver from the city. Anyway...." He leaned his head back and stared into the past. "Bull and I both served as Jackson's aides."

Chapter



Twenty-five

Henry hated thinking about those days; how much of an idiot he'd been. But he'd told Sue about Bull, and now he needed to do the same with May. How very different the two were in a lot of ways, yet so much alike in others.

"At first, everything was fine between us. Jackson kept us busy, and we both worked hard for the general. Then I started noticing little things, smirky sideways glances, a condescending tone in his voice. Then once Silas hung Patty Boy on me, and Bull realized how much I hated it, he never missed an opportunity to tease me."

"How old were you?"

"Sixteen."

"That's right, I remember now. So what about Bull?"

"Couple of years older, but I was pretty much full grown. I'd always been big for my age."

"So why was he messing with you?"

"Wasn't ever sure. Who knows? But while we were waiting for the British to attack, I heard a juicy little rumor about Bull, so I turned the tables on him. Must have been some truth it, and well...the war of words escalated."

"Hold it, what was the rumor?"

Henry gritted his teeth, grabbed his chest, and let out the chuckle. "Exact same thing Sue asked when I told her this story."

"Did she let you dodge the question?"

"No."

"So, what was it?"

"Seems Bull had trouble with the sporting ladies. Those who frequented such establishments claimed he never got his money's worth."

May leaned back and studied him a moment, then a bit of realization dawned. "Oh.... So what about you, Mister Buckmeyer? Did you ever visit such establishments?"

"No."

"Never?"

He looked her straight in the eyes; even in the lamp light he could see the disbelief. "No, not once."

"How come?"

"Never wanted to do what my father had done."

"You never went to The Swamp?"

"I didn't say that, but it was the gambling I went for, not the ladies."

"Ever win?"

"Some, but back to my story."



May wanted to ask more about his gambling days, but that also might open the door for him to question her about her sordid past. Definitely appeared they had a vice in common.

Her and her big mouth asking about The Swamp. Either he didn't pick up on it that she knew what New Orleans' infamous seedy section was known as, or he was just being a gentleman.

For a few minutes while he rambled on, she tried to count all the gold coins she'd left there.

"So when he wouldn't fight me, I insulted his manhood."

She tried to recall what he just said, but it wasn't there. "Why wouldn't he fight you?"

"Said Jackson would hang him for killing his pet aid."

"Why'd he think that?"

"I just told you. He was a prize fighter, undefeated, already won six or seven matches."

"Really, and you were challenging him?"

"That's right. I was full of myself back then. I'd killed that lumber jack, and well, figured if I whipped Bull, I could silence the rest of them. Make them call me Patrick instead of Patty Boy."

"So what happened?"

"He finally agreed, so we went down to the edge of camp, roped off a ring then got after it."

"Who won?"

"The rules we agreed to, the ones they'd been using in England for years, were a round lasted until someone was knocked down, or even thrown down. You'd get half a minute breather, then the next round started." He shrugged. "I'd just knocked him down to end the twelfth round when Jackson stopped the fight."

"So no one won?"

"Well, I would have been smart to call it a draw, but I didn't. Claimed I won. I'd put him on the ground eight of the twelve rounds, and that got his goat something terrible."

“No rematch?”

“Not until the other day.”

She wanted to ask him about this latest fight, but more so, she wanted him to rest. She stood. “Can I get you anything?”

“No, sit back down.”

“You need to rest, Henry, heal up. If you want anything, I’m happy to fetch that, but seeing as how I can’t get in bed with you, I’ll be taking my leave.”

He tried to put on a hurt look. “Fine, run off then, I’ll just lay here all by myself and listen to my ribs knit.”

Seeing through his proffer for pity, she stopped at the door. “Hey, I’ve got an idea.” She backed up a step. “Scoot down, get flatter. Do you need any help?”

“No, what’s your idea?”

“I’ll read you to sleep; I’ve got five more chapters finished.”

Upon her return, he gave her a weak smile, then his eyes slipped shut before she finished the second page. She finished that one and the next in a slow monotone then eased out, reading as she went.

She followed a delicious aroma to the kitchen. Mammy worked at the stove. Her brother and Chester sat at the table’s far end; everyone else had disappeared. May grabbed a fresh cup of coffee and put her feet under the table.

Mammy grinned. “He lasted longer than I expected, must not have given him enough laudanum.”

May nodded. No wonder he drifted off so fast.

“It’s a wonder more ribs weren’t broken, hard as that Bull was beating on him.”

The very thought sickened her stomach. She sat back. Perhaps she’d had enough coffee. Oh, how she would have hated seeing another man beating so on Henry. “So Bull won the fight?”

“No, ma’am. Mister Henry gave way more than he got.” The freed slave shook his head. “At first, looked to me I wasn’t going anywhere.”

Chester nodded. “Levi said the same thing. Bull worked Henry over hard. Seemed Glover was getting in three or four licks to one in the beginning, but then like he got a second wind or something...”

“Yes, ma’am.” Mammy’s brother spoke up. “Ain’t never seen such. He went berserk on Bull Glover. Could be the Lord Himself sent an angel with some special drink, maybe even something like He gave Elijah. You knows, that powerful food the prophet ran thirty days on.”

May shook her head with no idea what the man spoke of.

His head bobbed up and down. “Yes, ma’am, he about killed old Bull, beats him to a pulp before he be quits. Mister Levi jumped the ring’s wooden wall and grabbed ahold on his uncle ’fore he sent old Bull straight to the devil.”

“My, my, my.” Mammy turned from the stove.

He looked at his sister. “Levi told us later that he figured Mister Henry wasn’t about to stop.”

As she listened to the men discuss the fight in greater detail, a horrible thought bit her. Had Henry ever loosed that wolf in him on Sue or any of the girls? Or even Levi?

The day broke, and the house came alive, though more subdued than normal. The question quieted her as well.

All morning while he slept, she pondered the mysterious, uncontrollable animal that lived inside the one she loved. Was she risking her life being around a man capable of such violence?

But she’d never heard of him going crazy on someone undeserving. Should she ask Rebecca? Or Rose? Would either tell her the truth? Maybe Wallace had seen it loosed.

But if it had only been Sue, would anyone know but the man himself?

All that day, she argued with herself, and in the end, decided she needed to discuss it with Henry. But Mammy wouldn’t let her in.

The cook guarded his door, and the one time she slipped into the library unseen, Newly Blue stooped her off. Mammy came a running and led her back into the kitchen where she prepared dinner.

“Now, sweet child, he needs his sleep if he’s going to heal. He’s home, came back to us.” She hustled around then sat a plate with two of her cookies before May. “Here’s my peace offering, don’t be angry with me. When he asks for you, I promise I’ll come get you. Fair enough?”

May hung her head. “I know you’re right. I’m not upset with you, Mammy.” She took a bite of cookie as the dear lady sat a glass of milk in front of her. “If I promise, give you my word not to disturb him, do you suppose it would be acceptable to write in the library?”

Mammy studied her hard, then a smile cracked her stern face. “Yes, Miss May, I do suppose that would be just fine.”

“Of course I’ll leave the door opened.”

He slept the whole day away, and that night. She moved back upstairs into Mary Rachel’s room though insisting the girl stay, too. Still, May couldn’t bring herself to ask about her father’s temper.

Could be she should let the matter lay for the time being. Until she could talk to Henry himself, go straight to the horse’s mouth; never even once suspected the man of ever stretching the truth.

She could wait. Let him heal up.

Then she’d find out for sure.



Trace chains rattled, mules snorted, then a passel of bare feet landing on black dirt echoed through his room. Henry tried to work the sounds into his dream, but too many voices and too much commotion brought him to consciousness.

He rose to one elbow. The ache behind his eyes and in his chest begged him to go back prone, but his bladder shouted the loudest.

Once dressed, he figured it had to be the pickers Jean Paul had contracted. His chest still pained him a bit, but nothing like it had been. He eased out to the porch.

Exactly as he figured, maybe two dozen folks milled about eating Mammy's offerings. May's perfume reached him first. Oh, he had missed her smell. So good to be home.

Then the lady herself showed with that smile that could light the night sky to noon. "You're up! How are you feeling?"

"Not too bad, head's hurting."

She pressed her shoulder into his. "I'm very proud you came home to me."

He pressed back then grinned at her. "I am, too."

"Are these all the pickers? Mammy's cooked enough food for a small army."

"Don't know, but if you missed it, I've been asleep for, what? Twenty hours?"

"Ha! Twenty, you say? No, sir. It's been over seventy-two. I about gave up on you ever getting out of bed." She laid her head on his shoulder.

"I couldn't have slept that long. You were reading your story, and..."

She nodded. "That was early Friday morning, my love, and now it's Monday. Mammy's kept you drugged and in bed so your ribs could heal. She even posted Newly Blue at your door to keep me and your babies out."

"She didn't."

"Oh, yes, she did. After I promised not to bother you, she let me write in the library."

He pressed his hand against his forehead. "What did she give me?"

"Laudanum."

A chuckle escaped, but it didn't hurt his chest near as much as his head. "Any coffee left?"

She nodded toward his rocker. "I'm sure there is. You sit a spell, and I'll fetch us some."

By the end of his second cup of hot, black coffee, the ache behind his skull dulled to a manageable level. But then like she'd been brooding over something the whole time he'd been asleep, May stood

and put her hand on hips.

“Henry Buckmeyer, there’s something I need to know.”

Chapter



Twenty-six

“What’s on your mind?”

May shook her head. When was she going to learn to keep her mouth shut? Might as well ask now and get it over with. What else could she say? “I’ve just been wondering. Did you ever let that wolf out on Sue?”

He recoiled as though she’d thrown her coffee on him. “What wolf?”

“That beast you keep chained up inside.”

“A wolf? Is that what you call it?”

“I suppose it’s as good a name as any. What do you call it? I’ve just been wondering if she ever had to deal with it.”

“Sue and I for sure had our share of fusses. She could get pretty passionate over her stances, but absolutely no. Never once. Not ever did I even think about raising a hand to her.”

“Any of the children or Levi?”

“No, May. Do you think I’m some kind of monster?”

She loved him being so honest, but still...evidence was strong against him. “Well, of course not. But twice now—just since I’ve known you—Levi has stopped you from killing someone. That Frank guy after he shot you, and now Bull from what I hear.”

“Both times, not only did the other guy start it, he threatened my family. I’ve told you before. I will do whatever it takes to protect us.”

“According to Big Hoss, Glover had given up.”

He nodded. “True, but by then....” He looked away. “I can’t say if I would have stopped or not because I just don’t know. I’m proud Levi was there.”

For a while, she just sat quietly.

“May? You know me, don’t you?”

Looking into his eyes, those deep blue eyes that opened so wide the door to his soul, she knew. It washed over her like a refreshing summer rain until his love drenched her.

Soaked in truth, not one dry thread of doubt existed. He would never hurt her. As certain of it as her love for him, she found his hand

and brought it to her cheek.

For a good while, she sat next to him holding it there and rocked gently.

Then he stood. "Let's go look at your story."

With only a few minor suggestions, her new chapters passed his muster. She loved his reaction to her words, but what author didn't enjoy such praise? That it came from him doubled her delight.

Twice that evening, she thought he might take a knee, ask the question she longed to hear, but by its end, she climbed the stairs to her room as he disappeared into his.

Alone, even though he slept under the same roof.

Why didn't he remedy the sad situation when he held the solution in his grasp?

She'd waited so long, and she could be about planning her wedding, should be, but the big hairy brute withheld his cooperation.

Next morning, sitting beside her love, between her second and third cups of coffee, it hit her. His ribs! He was waiting on his ribs to heal to ask her. That had to be it.

Probably figured she'd want to run grab a judge and say I do the day he asked, and he needed to be in top shape. She studied on his handsome face until he noticed.

"What? What are you grinning about?"

She smiled even bigger then gave him a double nod. "How you feeling this fine morning?"

"Fair to middling, how about you?"

"Oh, I'm great. Your ribs still sore?"

"Some."

"I managed another chapter after you sent me upstairs. Want me to fetch it and read it to you?"

"I'd love nothing better."

As that day melted into the next, May worked on her manuscript, content in the knowledge that once he completely healed—and according to Mammy that would take six weeks—he'd make all her dreams come true and ask her to marry him.

How could he not? He loved her.

She loved him. Henry Buckmeyer was the special man she'd saved herself for.

September cooled almost as much as Henry and Sue's love affair heated up the pages of May's novel. And after her first Texas summer, she found grateful an understated word to describe her appreciation of the heat breaking.

Then on the first day of October, everything changed including the weather. That morning started warm and muggy then turned gray and cooler. A light drizzle settled the dust, but never turned into a

good rain.

The precipitation proved enough to keep the children indoors during their playtime though. She retreated to the library while Henry read the little ones to sleep for their nap.

Even before she could find the right words to start with, Chester burst through the door holding a letter out, grinning bigger than she'd seen in years. "May, they...." He reached the other side of the desk and extended the paper toward her. "Here, read it your own self."

She took it, scanned past the part about her publisher depositing her last royalty check in her New York bank account, then stopped at the last paragraph. She slowed her reading to its end then reread that one again.

Her heart fluttered then raced.

"Wow. Fifty thousand dollars." She stopped herself from dancing a jig and looked at her brother. "That is what it says, right?"

"Yes, dear May, it does. And did you read the book tour part?"

"I saw that, but...." She studied on him, her mind spinning with all the remarkably good news. "Will you go with me?"

He backed away a step. "No, you don't need me now, little girl. Hire yourself a lady's maid to accompany you. I intend to remain here. In Texas. With Mammy."

His declaration failed to surprise her, though she wished he would have immediately agreed to go, choose her over his new lady friend. Yet, in some part of her, she understood and nodded.

Would she enjoy the company and assistance of a lady's maid? Not as much as Henry's. That was for sure. Her heart stopped at the notion, then took up a double time beat as the idea quickly fermented.

She'd love to show him Europe, stroll the ancient streets on the other side of the ocean with him! The Acropolis in Greece, the Colosseum of Rome, the Tower of London, and the Louvre.

But would he agree to go?

"Something wrong?"

"No." She grinned past her brother at Henry who stood in the doorway. She held out the letter. "Look. It's from my publisher."

"You don't say."

"They're offering a two book deal with a fifty thousand dollar advance and want to send me to tour Europe selling *The Granger*. Isn't it wonderful? They love your story!"

Scanning the letter, Henry smiled, but the gesture definitely appeared forced. "How soon?"

"What?"

"Are you leaving?"

She looked from him to her brother then back. "I have no idea yet. Will you go with me?"

He shook his head, but his eyes said yes. "I don't know how."

"We wouldn't have to leave for a while; we can wait until you're completely healed."

Chester held out a hand. "Excuse me, this conversation should be private." He nodded toward Henry then took his leave, shutting the door behind him.

Her love glanced toward the handcrafted oak boards, but left it closed. "Has nothing to do with my ribs."

"Then what would keep you from coming? We could tour Europe together. There's so much I want to show you, share with you."

"We've got over three thousand bales of cotton to ship, and –"

She held both hands up. "Jean Paul and Levi can see to all that, handle the business."

"What about my babies? I can't leave them for what? A year?"

"We can take them, too. They'd love it. I'll pay for everything, and it'll be so educational."

"You going to take Lacey, Charley, and Bart, too?"

"Sure, if you want. Why not?"

"No, not without their parents, then wouldn't be anyone left to run things."

"We wouldn't have to be gone a whole year, nine months wouldn't be so bad. They'd understand. It wouldn't be more than if they went off to a boarding school."

"Why, May? Why do you want to go?"

She looked away, a little shocked at the question. Wasn't it clear? How could she explain it? Make him understand?

She turned back. "Chester and I went after my third novel; I wanted to see the places I'd been writing about, but more so...." She stepped around the desk.

The desire to smother him with kisses flamed in the core of her being, but more than anything, she wanted him to understand her heart. "They snubbed me."

"How? Why?"

"I couldn't get any of the booksellers to even carry my books, even though well read in the states. And now...."

"So it's pride?" He stepped away, practically stomping to the window. "I can't go with you. There's no question about it. Not until we're married."

She breathed again, absolutely relieved. She'd read him wrong. Her grin blossomed into a giant smile. "Sounds good to me. Need a pillow?"

"A pillow? What for?"

"For your knee, silly."

His expression as her meaning dawned on him stabbed her heart.

She hadn't read him wrong at all. He was not proposing.

"I can't."

Her smile vanished. Every breath came hard. "But... Henry.... Why not?"

"You aren't a believer."

There it was! His stupid religion rearing its ugly head. What the baby said was true!

Disgust fanned those flames of sweet desire into hell's fiery furnace. Her face burned, but she kept control, refused to lose to his spiteful fictitious God.

"What a contradiction you are, Henry Buckmeyer. So wise and loving on the one hand, and utterly blind on the other! How in this world you can believe in such nonsense is beyond me."

"No, May, you're the one who's blinded. Mercy, woman, look around. God shows Himself in every situation, everywhere. How can you deny Him?"

"Ha!" She backed away. Blind indeed!

The man she thought she'd been saving herself for was a stark raving lunatic, a blithering idiot, a religious fanatic ready to throw her love away for the sake of a non-existent great benefactor in the sky.

"Let me tell you this. I know you love me, Henry Buckmeyer, and I love you, but if you're going to be so pigheaded, then I suppose it's best I leave now, get myself back to New York, and get on with my life."

Practically choking on her own words, she gasped. Why had she said it like that? Hadn't this place become home? His place become hers? No! It couldn't be, not with his stubborn insistence.

A wave washed over her. Would she faint?

He stepped closer, took her hands in his. "Please, don't. You still need to talk with Levi and Wallace, Rose and Laura, get their stories straight. You said your publisher wants two books, right?"

She closed her eyes.

Of course he was right. She couldn't run off. Not now, not yet. But just as soon as she could, she'd be gone.

She'd guard her heart and not be bamboozled one more minute by his lies. Lies? Were they lies or impossible dreams? Whatever they were made no difference! They shattered her heart and all its hopes.

Forget Mister Buckmeyer just like all the other hairy-legged brutes who'd turned her head. He was no different after all. Why, why, why? Whatever made her think he was?

She might never know. She'd definitely never ever fall for another one. She'd die single and alone. That was that!

She swallowed and steamed, but regained some semblance of composure.

“Fine, I’ll stay. Only until I finish The Granger and complete my interviews.”



Henry relaxed. It couldn’t have been fear that stopped his heart the instant she mentioned New York. He couldn’t lose her. Not now, not ever. “Good.” He swallowed. “Got any more pages for me to read?”

She did, and the batch was just as good as the rest, maybe better.

That night after his evening toddy with May on the porch passed peculiarly quiet, he spent extra time on his knees, but no solution exposed itself or shined any light to illuminate a particular path.

Lost as to how to get through that pretty noggin of hers, he floundered in the dark with no answers.

Some way, he had to get her to understand why he couldn’t, would never join himself with an unbeliever. But how? He could not let her leave. She’d be taking his heart with her.

Then what good would he be to anyone?

Oh, Lord, what am I going to do? Show me the way.

The next morning, he beat Levi to the barn and had The Black saddled before his nephew strolled in holding a cup of coffee. Smelled great, but he needed to see if his ribs could handle a bit of riding.

“Mornin’, Uncle.” Levi threw him a nod. “You sure about this?”

“One day or another. Thought I’d ride a ways with you, see how it goes.”

“I’d love the company. Don’t want you overdoing too soon though. I’d never live it down if you went and hurt yourself.”

“I won’t.” His legs protested more than his ribs, but after a half mile or so, his body stopped shouting at him to go back. He faced Levi. “You hear about May’s book deal?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Think you could get along without me for a year?”

“Don’t see why not. So you’re thinking about going with her?”

“Some, I guess. Don’t know if I can stand her leaving without me.”

“What about the condition of her soul, Uncle?”

“That’s a given, it’ll have to change.”

Henry managed the whole ride. No tracks or signs except the rootin’ and wallers of a new sounder of hogs, but he didn’t figure they stood much chance with Levi and Wallace and the boys.

While he brushed The Black out, May walked into the barn holding two steaming cups.

“Mammy said you rode out this morning with Levi. How you feeling?”

“Not too bad.” He took the cup she offered, sipped a bit then handed it back and led the horse toward his stall. His hand touched hers and as though seeing it for the first time, he remembered his night vision.

“You dream much, May?”

“No, not really.” She handed his coffee back. “Oh, I guess I do some, but I can never remember them once I’m awake.”

“Well, usually, I don’t either, but just now when I gave you back my coffee. I saw it again—what I dreamed last night. So weird. Governor Bell, you, and I sat at the dinner table talking politics.”

“Bell? Is he the Governor of Texas?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He chuckled. “It’s always stuck in his craw that Houston asked me first before he offered Pete the job of Adjutant General of the Texas Army.”

“Really? When was that?” She sounded a bit distant, not like her usual cheery self. Would she really leave? And would she stay upset with him until she did?

“Right after San Jacinto.”

“You didn’t want the job?”

“Naw.”

“But why?”

He smiled. “My family. Sue being due any day with CeCe is why Levi and I didn’t go to the Alamo.”

“But I thought —”

“Bless God.” He nodded. “They all perished. But after Goliad, and the baby arriving all safe and sound, there wasn’t anything keeping us home. We met up with Houston for San Jacinto.”

“That’s where Texas won her independence.”

“That’s correct, and after, no good reason to not head home. Wasn’t about to uproot my family to serve any longer.”

“In your dream. Did you know why the governor came here?” She sipped the hot brew. “Or did we go there?”

Chapter



Twenty-seven

The second week of October proved even nicer weather wise. May had tried to stay icy and freeze him out, but kept forgetting all the time—every time Henry gushed over more pages.

So she settled on cool, kind of like the wonderful Texas mornings. She could get used to this kind of weather. New York would already be getting frigid.

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't get over his declaration that she wasn't good enough for him. It ate at her. Still though, whenever he slipped his hand into hers, fireworks exploded, and her skin burned red hot.

Stupid heart, wanting something she wouldn't ever give it. Once she got to Europe....

She finally finished her manuscript. He read the last chapters of *The Granger* and cried happy tears. Broke her heart for him to relive those days, had to be hard on him, but maybe that's what he needed.

Maybe now he could love her, accept her just as she was, not expect her to believe in some fairy tale book of rules just because he chose to.

The next morning, after he got back from his ride around the property, he slipped in beside her at Mammy's kitchen table. She grabbed him a cup of black coffee—the least she could do for him letting her stay in his house rent free.

"Thanks, how are you this fine day?"

"I'm good. Rebecca won the lottery."

"What?"

"Yesterday afternoon, while you were reading the little ones to sleep, all the big girls drew straws."

"Oh yeah? What for?"

"Your oldest won the honor—to hear all of them tell it—of transcribing my manuscript."

"She'll do you a good job; Mary Rachel might have a prettier hand though."

"You're probably right, but everyone, even CeCe wanted a shot, so

what could I say? It'll be fine, I'm certain."

He smiled. "Had that same dream last night about Bell. It's strange. Think maybe the Lord is trying to tell me something, but I don't know what."

She stifled her disbelief and played along. "Anything new?"

"In my dream? He asked me to run with him next year."

"Really? How would that work? Like vice governor or something?"

"Well, we call it lieutenant governor."

"And you really believe he's coming?" She hadn't meant to sound so disgusted. Mammy gave her a look. How could he be so gullible?

"And so what are you supposed to tell him?"

"Don't know."

She burst out laughing, couldn't help herself, but covered her mouth and tried to rein it in. "I'm sorry."

He smiled.

At least she hadn't hurt his pride. "Tell me then, what good is a prophetic dream if you don't even know how to answer the man's proposal if—and that's a big if—Pete Bell actually showed up?"

"If he does come, and he does ask me, what do you think I should tell him?"

"Me? Why ask me? I certainly don't know."

"Surely you have an opinion."

Well, now, what was he up to? What difference did it make what she thought?

She'd be gone just as soon as she could get the Rangers and their ladies story straight for her next novel thought she'd call it *The Ranger*. She smiled at the thought then snapped back.

"What do you want, Henry? Seems to me that's what it boils down to."

He leaned in close to her ear. "All I want in the world is you."

She jumped to her feet, pressed her hand against her abdomen to keep it from slapping him. Of course he wanted her! How dare him! Wanted her to be...that was it!

He wanted her to be like Sue.

She stared at him only a moment then turned and marched upstairs.

She pulled her bag out from under the bed and proceeded to throw her things in. Not one more night would she spend in his house. No not one. She already knew enough of Levi and Rose's story.

Besides, she wrote fiction; she'd make up the rest.

With only two drawers emptied, the rhythmic clomp of a herd of horses drew her to the balcony. Seven mounted men rode up the hill toward the house. Six wore dusters and wide-brimmed hats.

The seventh, a tall man with a full beard, dressed in a fancy suit and donned a fancy, tall top hat.

Curiosity drove her downstairs and out to the front porch. She could pack later.

Henry strode toward the bearded man. "Pete! What a pleasure."

He turned back to the porch. "May, this is Governor Bell." He stepped sideways and gestured toward her. "Pete, meet May Meriwether, the famous novelist."

The governor dismounted then the other six men followed suit. "I heard you might be here, Miss Meriwether." He removed his hat. "My pleasure, ma'am."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Governor." He glanced sideways at Henry. "I've been hearing about you."

The one closest took Bell's reins as the man wrapped his arm around Henry's shoulder and the two strolled toward the porch. "My wife will be so jealous I've had this enjoyment. She's your biggest fan."

"You're too kind, sir. You tell her that I'm sorry I missed her."

Before she could say more, the children rushed out of the house, followed by Levi and Wallace, who after a brief word to the governor, went straight to the company of men with many greetings and much backslapping.

Henry must have noticed her surprise, and she couldn't have been more shocked at seeing the governor there. "These Texas Rangers guard the governor, May."

They all laughed and guffawed. She appreciated the camaraderie. For the rest of the morning, the crowd swapped stories and remembered old acquaintances. So much fun and joviality, she forgot all about being amazed that Pete Bell showed up.

Mammy outdid herself with the big dinner. How that woman could whip up such an extraordinarily delicious feast so fast amazed May.

Then just like in his dream, she found herself sitting at the table with Henry and Governor Bell. Gooseflesh crawled down her arms and up her legs and resulted in the weirdest sensation in her core that she'd ever experienced.

Whether in her belly or her heart, she could not testify.

Had he known the man was coming all along?

Bell smiled at her then turned to Henry. "Is there somewhere private we can talk?"

"Right here's good. We'll not be interrupted."

He glanced at her and smiled. "This conversation can't end up in one of your books, Miss Meriwether."

"Of course not, sir, I would never dream of breaking a

confidence.”

Could Henry have made up such an elaborate ruse to make her think his Almighty God sent him a dream? No, that would be nothing but deception. He could never stoop to such a hoax. But then, how....

“Good.”

The governor faced her man. “You interested in running with me next year?”

“You offering?”

The man laughed then faced May. “Did he tell you Houston asked him to be his adjutant general before he gave me the job?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, he did mention that.”

“What’s your opinion, Miss Meriwether? Should Henry run with me next term?”

She smiled. Her opinion sure seemed sought after that day, and over subject matter quite out of the realm of any rightful input.

The nausea or eerie whatever it was settled a bit, but nothing minimized her overwhelming astonishment of the man’s presence at Henry’s table.

“I’d say that’s his call.”

Bell turned back to the man everyone wanted around. “Run with me, and I’ll support you for governor after that.”

“I take it you’ve heard the rumors?”

“Of course. Any truth to them?”

“I’m considering touring Europe next year. Be kind of hard for me to serve with you if I was gone.”

Had she heard right?

Did he just indicate to the governor of Texas that he was thinking about going with her? Those were the rumors? Had she taken something wrong?

The half-packed suitcase up stairs on her bed crossed her mind. Maybe she’d jumped to conclusions and reacted too quickly.

“Europe. Sounds nice. So I don’t have anything to worry about then?”

“I didn’t say that.” Henry winked at her. “What about the compromise? You planning on signing it?”

“Compromise?” Oh, she wished she’d remained silent.

The visitor only gave her a cursory smile as though he didn’t have time or the need to explain to a woman. “Well, I’m considering it. That’s a lot of land Texas would be giving up.”

“Ah yes.” May lifted her chin a bit. “I read about that in New York. That article in the newspaper is actually what prompted my trip to Texas.” There, Mister High-and-Mighty.

“A bundle of debt they’d be taking off our hands, too.”

What was it with men? Why couldn't they just say what was on their minds and not beat around the bush? Reminded her of a kind of little dance the hairy brutes all loved.

Question really was: who led and who followed? No strong man wanted to give it up, and so they circled a topic until someone finally committed.

"True, have you read the whole bill?"

"Yes, sir." Her man took the lead. "There's definitely parts I don't like, but I'd put my name on it."

Bell nodded. "Well, I'm leaning that direction, too."

Henry leaned back, looked at May, then stared into the governor's eyes. "Give me your word you'll sign the compromise, and I'll not run against you."

"Excellent. Glad to hear that. I'd hate to campaign against you, and if you're still interested in '53, I'm your biggest supporter. Now how about a campaign contribution?"

"What did I give you last time?"

"Not enough. What about a thousand this go around?"

"And I've got your word on the compromise?"

"You do, sir."

Henry nodded. "Done."

With everything he'd come for in hand, didn't take Bell long to take his leave. It tickled May how the most powerful man in Texas came with hat in hand begging favors from her Henry.

Please don't run against me. Please give me some of your money. Henry Buckmeyer and his money wielded plenty of political power in Texas.

She marched upstairs and went to putting her things back into the drawers. If he was thinking about going with her, she could wait a few more days. Give him time to come to his senses.

Surely he'd figure out he shouldn't reject her over not believing in his stupid religion. Then an ugly thought raised its head again: whether or not he had arranged all of it to coerce her into believing.

She didn't even know if that man truly resided in the governor's mansion. And if so, Henry must have known he planned the trip to Red River County. But the man she loved....

Being a liar and cheat would be totally opposite his character as she knew it. He wasn't a monster or like that...was he?

The constant questioning drove her mad. A final decision needed to be made to maintain sanity. Could she know the real Henry for certain after only a few months?

For that matter, could anyone really ever know another person?

She flung herself across the bed and wept. She had no advisers. Chester didn't care anymore.

Oh, what was she going to do? She didn't want to stay, but the thought of leaving twisted her gut into so many knots, she'd never get untangled.



Before he met the novelist, Henry might have thrown in with Bell, but bless God, he'd been warned and had time to think it over. Millicent May—that's who he wanted.

Above all else.

Shocked him the way she reacted when he told her, but then the poor lady's soul suffered so much turmoil.

Draw her to Yourself, Lord. Make a way for us to be together. I trust You would not have brought her into my life only to take her away.

The rest of that day and deep into the night, he stayed in an attitude of prayer for his new love, voicing his pleas aloud whenever he found himself alone.

He woke the next morning with the shadows of a dream lurking in the corners of his mind's eye. Like a cougar crouching in the brush, he sensed it, but couldn't quite see the thing.

While he and New Blue made the morning rounds, the night vision dogged him. Several times, he almost saw it. Figured it had some significant meaning, but what?

And if God had a message for him....

Why couldn't he remember?

Then tracks of a lone rider crossing the Langford quelled all other thoughts. He reined left and cold trailed the intruder.

Chapter

Twenty-eight

For better than an hour, Henry followed the tracks until they doubled back across the creek then lost them on the well traveled road that led to Clarksville. Had some drunk got lost?

Doubtful.

He ran the possibilities, but reached no good conclusion to suspend his belief that something fowl circled.

After a few words of warning to Levi and Wallace, he returned to the big house on the alert. Maybe Mammy had saved him some breakfast. Had May waited on him?

He grabbed a cold biscuit on the way through the empty kitchen. When was the last time he'd been there that Jean Paul's mother wasn't eluded him, if there ever had been such an event at all. He found the novelist in the library studying a piece of paper.

She looked up. "Good morning, where you been so early?"

"Someone crossed the Langford last night; I followed his tracks until they headed back to town."

"Oh."

"Reach under my desk, about an inch past the middle drawer."

She smiled and did as told. "Why?"

"There's a pistol there, if you ever need it."

She jerked her hand back like he'd told her a rattler was hiding there instead of a Baby Paterson. She stared at him then moved her gaze over his shoulder. Tears welled.

"May? What's wrong?"

Her bottom lip quivered. She looked away. He turned around. What had disturbed her to tears? On scrutinizing, he came upon a dark spot on the wall right where Sue's picture used to hang. Was that a hole? He stepped closer and touched it. A chill washed over him.

His breath came hard. His heart pounded against his chest. His night vision came back like he just lived it. He faced her.

"Last night I had another dream."

May closed her eyes. Had he really not seen the bullet hole until just now? She looked at him. "You did?"

"Saw a house, white, and bigger than this one. You and Chester played chess out on a side porch, but you were children. Maybe twelve? Him fourteen or so."

A chill washed over her heart. "We played a lot of games back then. Were there blue shutters? Were there..." Shame faded her voice. "Blue... shutters?"

"He checkmated your king, and you slapped him."

Tears flooded her eyes and blurred her vision. She couldn't look at him and shook her head. How could he know that? How could he possibly have dreamed about that day?

"And he slapped you back."

No! How much did he see?

"The commodore, just inside heard the argument and saw him slap you and came running out."

"Stop!" She jumped to her feet. "You've been talking to Chester! And I don't appreciate it one bit. You have no right. Liar! You didn't dream this! There's no way you could have. Chester told you, and I'm going to give him a piece of my mind." She stormed toward the door.

He stepped toward her and caught her arm. "May, no. Your brother hasn't said a word. I swear it."

"And you didn't know about me shooting Wallace's pistol while you were gone off to New Orleans?"

"Wallace's pistol? You're the one shot that hole into the wall?" He smiled though not a big one. She might have slapped him if it had been any bigger than the slight grin. "I did not know that. Not until just now."

"So then tell me! What else did you dream?"

He released her arm and stepped closer. "The commodore beat Chester to the ground then took to stomping him. You were crying and screaming for him to stop. Your mother came out and ran between him and your brother. He slapped her, told her get out of his way, but she wouldn't. Kept begging him to go inside and calm down."

She wilted against him, and he steadied her to the desk chair then sat her down. She hung her head.

"The commodore slapped her again, but she still refused, so he grabbed her by the hair and dragged her inside with her pleading for him to stop. He jerked her through his study and to their bedroom."

She nodded, her heart suddenly cold, clad in iron. "What else? Did you see it all?" That Chester! Had he fallen under the man's spell? How could he be such a turncoat? Her own brother.

“At first, fear froze you, but your mother’s screams with each slap pulled you to the commodore’s study. You opened his desk drawer and took out his dueling pistols, both of them, one in each hand, then marched to their room. You knew he kept both guns loaded, and he’d taught you how to shoot them.”

“Chester knew all this.”

He eased closer and stroked her hair. “You stood there in the door holding the pistols at your side. Your mother had stopped screaming. Unconscious, but he kept slapping her. You hollered for him to stop.”

She shook her head, but couldn’t mouth any words. Had he really seen it? She rested her head against his hip. But how?

“He laughed at you, but that isn’t why you shot him.”

She leaned back and looked him in the eyes. “Oh, yes! You know it all, don’t you? So why then? Tell me why! I want you to, you’re so smart. Know everything! I hate you! So then why did I kill my father, Mister Buckmeyer? Enlighten me. What did you see in your so-called dream?”

“The look in his eyes. He was enjoying himself, and you saw it. You knew that after he killed her, he’d kill Chester, too. Maybe even finish you off. And there was no one to stop him. No one but you. Oh, my darling, I’m so very sorry.”

Her head shook back and forth, silently she screamed no! No! But the cold metal around her heart melted. Henry had seen it. She burst into sobs.

He lifted her to her feet and held her in his arms. “It’s all right, sweet May, go ahead and cry. My poor sweet darling. All this time.”

He saw it. Knew why she had to shoot the commodore. “Oh, Henry. Henry! I killed both of them. But how did you...?” She melted into him and wept from the depths of her soul.

He held her tight and close. “Sweetheart, the Lord showed me all this. Can’t you believe it, May? He loves you so very much and longs to set you free, give you real peace.”

Pushing back, she glared into his eyes. “No! There cannot be a God! No loving Creator would ever let a little girl go through what I had to.”

“Adam and Eve were created perfect. The earth was perfect. It was their sin that brought evil into the world. But Father God still loved man so much, He made a Way for us to come to Him again, be redeemed through His Son Jesus. God did not do this to you; the commodore’s evil choices brought you to that day. The Lord made a way for you to escape.”

She buried her head into his chest. “Are you right? Could you be? Is there really a loving Father up there?” He’d showed Henry that Governor Bell was coming, and now, he’d showed him something no

one—not even Chester—knew. She'd never told him about the look in the commodore's eyes.

That evil that plagued her dreams and held her tongue.

"What do I do, Henry? How do I recompense my sins? I've murdered, killed another human being. How can God still love me?"

He rocked her in his arms then slipped into the chair with her on his lap and looked into her eyes. "God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son so that whoever would believe in Him would not perish, but have everlasting life."

That's all, just believe? That was all that was required? "But how do I become a Christian? It can't be so simple. What must I do?"

"We believe that through the grace—the unearned favor—of the Lord Jesus Christ, we are saved. Believe on Him. Confess with your mouth and believe in your heart that God the Father raised Him from the dead after He died on the cross to pay the debt you owed, and you will be saved. It is that simple, my love. Just that simple."

"I want to."

He tilted her chin up toward him. "Will you pray with me?"

She wanted to. She wanted peace. She wanted to quit fighting and carrying the burden of her sin. She wanted to belong to this wonderful man. With tears still running down her cheeks, she nodded. "Yes, I will."

"Father God, thank You for Your mercy and grace." He paused and she repeated after him. "I have sinned and I am so sorry, Lord. Please forgive me."

She repeated his words. Her heart beat slowed, and something warm came over her, something so clean and precious. Henry was waiting again. What had he just said? Oh, yes. "Cleanse my heart by the Blood of Your Son and take all my burdens and cares."

"I confess that Christ is Lord and give Him my heart and my life."

The warmth spread throughout her. Such a peace that she'd never known, not in her whole lifetime, washed over her in waves. She looked up into his face. It almost glowed. "He's doing it! He's really doing it! He forgives me, Henry."

She burst into fresh sobs. "I confess! Jesus is Lord, and I do give Him my life and my heart! Oh, Henry, Isn't it wonderful?" She leaned her cheek against his and hugged him. She never wanted to get up.

Between gasps, she pushed back, twisted a bit then held his face, a hand on each side. "Can we get married now?"

"Yes, my love. Will you marry me?"

She sniffed then grinned. "Yes, thank you for finally asking."

For a too many beats of her heart, she snuggled in. May Meriwether—the bride. Oh the joy! But best of all, she was saved. Oh, how wonderful to be clean. Why she had been so obstinate?

The clock struck its louder hourly chime. Right after the tenth and last metallic bong, a light rap sounded on the door.

“Daddy?”

May kissed him hard on his mouth then jumped up and whispered “Mary Rachel!” She went to wiping her eyes and face to make herself more presentable. What would she think? He never shut the door when she was in there before!

He stood, nodded May back into the chair, then strolled to the door and opened it. “What is it, baby?”

The girl leaned close and said something to her father.

“Sure, baby, send him in.”

She stuck her head further in and nodded, smiling. “Good Morning, Miss May.”

“Yes, it is. Actually, it’s the most wonderful of mornings.”

Mary Rachel smiled, looked like she wanted to ask, but held a finger up. “I’ll be right back.”

Henry faced her. “Seems she has a suitor who wants a word with us.”

“Oh, want me to go somewhere?”

“No, ma’am, not at all. You’re on the verge of being her mother. Stay.”

She liked the sound of that, the way he said us. And on the verge, too. How close exactly was she? She’d always dreamed of a big wedding, with a fancy dress and like a thousand adoring well wishers cheering her on, but none of that mattered. Not now. All she wanted stood right there in front of her.

Shortly, Mary Rachel ushered a nice-looking young man into the room. “Miss May, this is Caleb Wheeler. Daddy, you remember him, right?”

“Of course.”

She smiled. “Caleb, this is our good friend May Meriwether, the novelist.”

The young man nodded at May then extended his hand to Henry who took it and shook. “Good to see you, son.” He looked at his not-so-baby girl. “Excuse us, Mary Rachel.”

At first, she didn’t move. Opened her mouth then didn’t say anything, just backed out. “Yes, sir.”

Henry closed the door then nodded to the right hand wingback. “Have a seat, Caleb.” Henry took the opposite one. “So Mary Rachel tells me you want a word with us?”

“Yes, sir. I came last evening, but then it got dark, and I decided I best wait until this morning.”

Henry nodded. “That’s good to know, and probably for the best.”

“Yes, sir, Sir.” He glanced at May. “Ma’am, well...uh....” He

smiled and looked her square in the eye. "Sorry for stuttering. Had this all planned out. I've come for permission to call on Mary."

She pointed at Henry. "Best ask him, Caleb."

He turned back. "Oh, yes. Sorry, sir. Permission, sir? With your leave then, I'd like to call on Mary. We're in love, sir."

"You are."

"Yes, sir. Don't know if you've noticed, but we've been speaking every Sunday for better than a year now."

"I've noticed, Caleb. How's your mother? She better?"

"Oh, yes, sir, much. But she and Pa and the girls are going back to Little Rock in a week or so. My grandpa died, and they're going to be running his store, take care of my granny."

"Hate to hear that. My condolences to your family. They'll be missed in the community. They selling their land?"

"Oh, no, sir. Pa already said he'd sign over his headright to me."

"How old are you now Caleb?"

"Twenty-two, sir."

"How far from your place to here?"

"Fifteen mile or better, sir."

Henry nodded, seemed to be debating with himself then smiled at the young man. "Saturday suppers, Mammy has everything ready at six, don't be late."

The fellow jumped to his feet. "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." He extended his hand again and once Henry took it, shook vigorously.

"Bring a clean shirt, you can stay in the bunk house then go home after church on Sunday if that works for you."

Oh, yes, sir. That's a top notch idea, sir. I'd be pleased to." He nodded. "Thank you, sir."

Henry stood. "Caleb, let me explain something."

"Yes, sir."

"You ever dishonor or hurt my baby girl, and... Well, just don't."

Caleb gulped double, nodded, then managed a weak. "Yes, sir. I won't, sir. You can count on me, sir. I'd never —"

"While you're here, someone else is to be with the two of you at all times. She's got plenty of sisters to chaperone. One of the boys would be fine as well. Don't let me catch the two of you by yourselves."

"Yes, sir. No, sir. I mean, of course, sir. I'll gladly abide by that, sir."

Henry put his hand on the young man's shoulder. "You let me know if there's any way I can help your family—or you after they've gone—with a crop or cattle. Whatever you need."

"Yes, sir. Thanks. Mighty kind of you, sir." The sir-ing-est young man she'd ever known walked toward the door. "Thank you again,

sir." He turned to May as he opened it. "Ma'am, thank you very much. And very pleased to meet you."

Then just him and her alone—again—with the door shut. He smiled. "That went well."

She laughed. "It's a wonder the young man didn't soil himself."

He grinned. "I think the implied harm was what he hated worse. Did you see the look in his eyes?"

"I did, but enough of Caleb. Can we get married today?"

"What? No big wedding?"

"You know, my whole life I've dreamed of a grand wedding to beat the nines, with hundreds if not thousands of well wishers, cheering me on, but it isn't the wedding I'm after anymore. It's only my groom. It's you I want for the rest of my life, and the sooner you're mine, the sooner I am yours, the better! Big weddings take a lot of planning and money, or have you not noticed all the work Rebecca and the girls are putting into her and Wallace's coming nuptials."

"I have."

"And besides, I do not intend to steal one tiny rumble of their thunder. Being one with you will satisfy my every desire and make me the happiest woman alive."

"You talked me into it. Let's go tell everyone, and get them all ready to go to town. Better still, I'll send Jean Paul for the preacher."

"We can get married right here? Oh, that'll be wonderful!" She threw her arms around his neck. "I love you, Henry!"

Chapter



Twenty-nine

Henry stared into her eyes then kissed her ever so gently; she kissed him back and hugged him hard. He made himself stop. “We best go get everyone together, before we get things out of order.”

She put her forehead against his. “You’re right. We’ve waited this long, we can stand another few hours.”

He lifted her up, then she helped him to his feet. Halfway to the door, he froze. “May, answer me one question, and I’ll never bring that day up again.”

She nodded, but the joy in her eyes dimmed.

“You said earlier, you killed both your parents. How so?”

She closed her eyes and pursed her lips. “Chester and Mother dreamed it up, and I let them.”

“What’s that, baby?”

“All the house slaves had fled. They all knew how the commodore acted once he got going. So they—we—decided instead of telling the truth, for Chester to shoot Mama then put the gun in Grandfather’s hand and say he shot her then she shot him back in self defense. Chester did it, and that’s the story we told the sheriff.”

“Mercy, why didn’t you just tell the truth?”

“They said no one would believe it. And without Mama getting shot, they’d make it out that she murdered him even though her beating was quite obvious.”

“That’s just wrong.” He shook his head.

“I almost told, but Chester said they’d put me away, and the commodore’s kin would legally get Sea Side. But Mama never recovered from the wound. Chester didn’t aim too good.”

“How terrible for him.”

“Doc said he hit her in the liver. She died of the jaundice, so yellow you’d have thought she was a slave herself.”

“So you inherited everything when you were thirteen?”

“Mama had the lawyers fix it all up so that I didn’t get control until I was twenty-one. She told me about my real father about a week before she died. Chester already knew, but he had sworn to Silas he’d

keep the secret.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too, Henry. Now can we get things in gear? I’m not getting any younger.”



Took only fourteen minutes to get everyone in their seats; May figured that had to be a record, except dinner time was getting close. No one in their right mind wanted to miss any of Mammy’s meals.

Henry stood and held a hand out. Everyone quieted. “First, May has something she wants to tell everyone.” He sat down.

She looked at him. “What?”

He leaned in, cupped his hand over her ear. “Bible says if you’ll confess Jesus before men, he’ll confess you before the Father.”

“Oh. Yes, of course.” She jumped to her feet. Her cheeks warmed, but yes, she needed to do this. She looked around at all the Buckmeyers and Baylors, stopping at Chester.

He’d love this.

“Well, I’m walking on air I think. A few minutes ago, I asked Jesus to save me, and He did.”

For half a heartbeat, silence boomed in her ears.

Then Chester jumped up so fast, he knocked his chair over and made his way around the table to her. He wrapped her in his arms and hugged her tight, like he might never let go.

“Oh, May, that’s wonderful!” His voiced cracked. Was he about to break into tears? He buried his face into her hair and neck. “Praise God, I’m so happy.”

More voices joined in the congratulations and hallelujahs. Appeared everyone agreed, then one of the children, maybe Houston, started clapping and all the others joined in.

Levi and Wallace whopped like she’d just rode a bronco or something.

Gooseflesh popped out all over.

How wonderful to belong to the Lord! And to have such a big family to share it with! She knew now what everyone had been talking about. She sat back down and faced Henry.

“Your turn.”

The man stood and held out both hands again until they settled down, but smiles still adorned the table all around, looking like a family around the crib of a newborn.

“Friends, family, I asked May to marry me, and she said yes.” He looked right at Jean Paul. “Would you be so kind as to fetch the preacher? We’ve decided today’s a perfect day to become one.”

More celebrating ensued. Whoops and hollers and back slapping and hugs flowed like the love from her heart to her beloved. After not too long, Chester took Mammy's hand and quieted the room again.

"Would it be fine if we were to make it a double wedding?"

May looked to Henry who smiled. She faced her brother. "Of course, a double wedding would beat the nines."

Then like her soon-to-be husband, the general, went to ordering his minions into action. Of course, he did it with gentile suggestions and plenty of how-about's. In the end, his marshalling served the purpose of everyone doing his bidding.

May discovered the lesson she'd found Sue learned on the Jefferson Trace. Henry did know the best way to do things. How fine he led. How blessed she was God chose her to be his—and His!

Oh, the rest of her life would be so much fun, so much better than all the days before that one. Her wedding day!

Mid afternoon, after she'd picked out her wedding dress, a lovely white, floor-length gown loaded with lace, the big girls suggested baths, and Henry went to heating water.

Wonder he didn't think of it himself.

Even before the preacher arrived—the man's name escaped her, she needed to find out—the house filled with neighbors. Who spread the word? She loved it though.

Her spur of the moment wedding would host more well wishers than even in her dreams. But instead of strangers, these folks obviously loved Henry. True friends of his, and soon to be hers.

How grand, almost made her want to forget traveling to Europe, but having her husband make the trip with her would make it so much fun. He'd never seen Europe, and so many wonderful places she wanted to share with him called her name.

Then it happened.

A fiddler played.

Chester walked her down the aisle then stood beside Henry. Jean Paul, with his mother on his arm, beamed, coming toward the makeshift altar flanked by candles and lilies and roses from the garden out front.

The girls had done an excellent job of decorating, and made her and Mammy the loveliest bouquets of wild prairie flowers.

Then just like that, in a blur of unadulterated love that she and Henry vowed would last until death parted them; amidst I do's all around—love, honor, and forsaking all others—that wouldn't be hard.

Where in the whole world could another man exist who compared with her love? She became Mis'ess May Buckmeyer.

And Mammy, who loved May's surprise suggestion, became a Meriwether—Jewel Merriwether, because she was such a jewel.

Chester loved it, too.

What joy consumed Mis'ess May Buckmeyer! She loved her new name as much as Chester's new wife loved hers! Never a moment in all her life had she been so completely filled with happiness.

The new day broke with him still in bed. She snuggled in close. What a night. She never dreamed marriage would be so enthralling.

He smiled. "Good morning, Mis'ess Buckmeyer."

"Oh, I'd call it a grand morning, Mister Buckmeyer." She scooted up in bed. "Want me to get us coffee?"

"Later."

She loved it that he didn't want her to leave. "Did you notice Caleb last night?"

"Guess not. Why?"

"Oh, most of the evening, he was very attentive to Mary Rachel, but a time or two I noticed him talking to the Wheeler girl. It just appeared to me that —"

"Nothing to be concerned over; they're cousins, nothing strange going on."

"Oh. Well. He only did it when she wasn't around, and.... Oh, well, I'm sure you're right."

"Dark haired, more woman than girl, early twenties, around his age—that the one?"

"That's her, wore a dark dress. Blue maybe, and a long braid."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, even if they weren't cousins, Mary Rachel wouldn't have anything to worry about. The girl's nowhere near as beautiful."

"Nowhere near her money either. Believe her name's Lanelle, Caleb's mother's brother's girl."

"Hmmm, I sure would've bet.... Oh well, never mind; come here to me, my mister." May snuggled back down. She loved her ready-made family and all the drama that came with it.

Soon though, she'd have her own little one, not that the Buckmeyer babies weren't hers now. Bonnie didn't remember her mother at all, and of course, Houston never knew Sue.

She listened to his heartbeat for the longest, then a new idea brought her back upright. "Why don't we take the big girls with us?"

He rolled toward her and smiled. "You talking Europe?"

"Sure, the little ones wouldn't really appreciate it, but the three big girls would love it. Could be a break for young Caleb, and Mary Rachel might tell the true tale if he's really in love."

"That'd be good. And if we took Bonnie and Houston, then Charley, Bart, and Lilly would be sick we didn't take them, too." He tapped the tip of her nose playfully. "All of them would be a handful traveling."

"No doubt. Just an idea, though. We can think on it. How soon do you think we could leave?"

"For sure not until after Rebecca and Wallace's wedding. What say we stay until January?"

"That'll work fine. How long do you think we can be gone?"

"Six, seven months at most." He fingered her curls. "Have I ever told you how much I love your hair?"

"No, but I sure am glad!" Counting the months, January to June or July, she frowned. "Put us back in the middle of your nasty Texas heat. I think I'd so prefer easing into summer."

"Maybe everyone could meet us in New York when we get back. We can spend a month there showing them all around. If they left here, say two weeks after we sailed, we'd both get there about the same time."

"Oh, that sounds like fun! We might just have to do that." She kissed his cheek. "Do you suppose we can go to North Carolina, too, on our way home? I'd love to show you Sea Side."

"Sure." He kissed her neck, and all conversation ceased.



The big clock struck its eighth chime, just as a light tap on the door sounded. Henry swung out of bed, grabbed his robe, and threw May her housecoat. "Yes?"

The door creaked opened; Bonnie stuck her head in, grinning ear to ear. "Do the lovebirds want coffee?"

May slipped out of bed. "Oh my, yes! We'd love some." Houston, right behind his sister, slow walked toward his new mother with a steaming cup.

Bonnie handed her offering up to him. "Morning, Daddy."

"Good morning, my littlest lady. Thanks for the coffee."

"You're welcome. Can we call Miss May 'Mother' now?"

"Yes, of course, that's who she is."

"Good." She grinned and jumped up next to her new mama. May balanced her coffee in the air. "Want breakfast in bed, too? Miss Laura took over for Mammy—I mean Miss Jewel—just for today, but she did herself right proud."

"Hey." Houston grinned. "CeCe says I ain't going to be the baby anymore on account y'all got married. That ain't true. Is it?"

Bonnie swiped at her brother, but he dodged her. "Samuel Houston Buckmeyer, ain't is not a word, and you need to learn some manners."

May smiled. "Well, it does take time, but hopefully we'll have a new baby in a year or so."

Henry nodded, but that would be it. He'd shot his mouth off and promised her one, but one was all—the end—the exclamation! He'd not be stupid and keep giving her more children until it killed her.

Days slipped by, the girls all rightfully engrossed in Rebecca's wedding, while May scribbled away.

It amazed him how she cut right to the heart of a matter, telling a story so it seemed you were right there with Levi and Rose.

She did take his advice about beefing up the scene where the yaps tried to steal Laura back, but then went a bit too far with splattering blood and brain matter over everyone.

He loved her reading him her latest pages. Also, her time writing gave him the opportunity to see to his vast empire, not that he'd ever admit aloud to having one.

Lord, have mercy. He been given go much, but then, bless God, the Lord had sent him Jean Paul and put it in Levi and Wallace's heart to stop rangering and relieve him of the day-to-day operations.

After a week of staying in bed with May, he went back to riding the perimeters of a morning.

New Blue acted a bit standoffish at first, as though punishing Henry for taking his wedding week off, but soon enough, the son of his old friend got right back to normal.

Just like Sue. She never could stay mad at him either. Hopefully, he'd never find out if May held a grudge.

October gave way to November then right after Thanksgiving, the coming Rusk nuptials and the trip to Europe took on lives all their own. Like the Frankenstein monster, each threatened to consume anyone or anything that stood in its way.

At times frustrations flared, feathers ruffled, and offenses festered over nothing.

Praise God though, in His mercy, Rebecca and Wallace got hitched, and all the overseas travel plans finalized. And to think he only had to send Jean Paul to post seven different letters over two months to get it all straight.

Mercy, took less planning to move Jackson's army to New Orleans.

Then on the very day, while they all were kissing him and May and the three big girls goodbye, Mary Rachel took a turn hugging his neck. "Daddy, I'm sorry. I really am, but I can't go. No, I mean I'm not going. I can't leave. I won't."

Chapter

Thirty

Henry leaned back and stared at his not-so-baby girl. “What did you just say?”

She grimaced, then her eyes flashed—so much like her mother. “I cannot be gone for seven months. I thought for a while I could, but I just can’t, Daddy.”

Her new mother stepped close. “But Mary Rachel, why? It’ll be the trip of a lifetime. I promise you’ll adore Europe.”

“It’s just Mary now, no Rachel. That’s what Caleb calls me.”

Henry wanted to grab Just Mary and shake some sense into her. Instead, he lowered his voice and filtered his tone through as much calm as he could muster. “So. This about that boy?”

“He’s a man, Daddy, and you know it. We love each other.”

“If he loves you, baby, then he’ll wait. It’s only seven months. He should be thrilled you’re getting to go to Europe.”

“Well, he might. But I’ve made my decision, and I’m not going.”

May stepped in front of him. “Mary, please reconsider. You’ll have so much fun and get to see things you’ll remember for the rest of your life. You may never have the chance to go again.”

The girl smiled. He hated her growing up. “Mama May, Daddy said it was your idea to take us with you, and I thank you, but my mind’s set. I’m not going.”

Henry studied on his firstborn, as pigheaded as her mother. But then that passion drew him to Sue like a kid to a cookie jar. Only one of the things he’d loved about her, but now he had four daughters.

Would he always have to deal with stubborn women? “We’ve booked your passage.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. I should have told you sooner. Like I said, I thought I could do it. Let Bonnie take my place.”

His youngest girl burst into the middle of the showdown. “Can I, Daddy? Please take me! I’ll be good. Mama, tell him how good I’ll be.” She turned those doe eyes on him. “Pleeeeeease.”

May patted her head. “She is powerful good, Henry, and the next in line, too.”

Henry hated this. Everything was set. The little ones didn't like it much, but understood about all the work and boring grownup stuff their new mother had planned for the trip.

Now one of their own was going. He faced Houston. "What do you think, Son?"

He backed up a step. "If Charley and Bart ain't going, then I ain't."

"Samuel Houston Buckmeyer." Bonnie stretched her arm toward him, pincher fingers at the ready.

But Bart stepped in front of his best partner. "Det your pincher tlawz down and stop it, Bonnie Tlaire." Her expression changed from joyful to outraged. "Like a dood dirl." His whole tone took on a sweetness. "Betause you know you ain't da boss of him." He looked up for some help. "Isn't dat right, Untle Henwee?"

"Yes, Bart. That's correct."

His baby girl looked at her younger brother and his right hand man then smiled. "Oh, yes, never mind Houston."

The boys both curled their lips at her. "See Pa? See how she thinks she's the boss just because she's older? Shouldn't be telling me how to talk, it ain't right."

Bart covered his mouth toward Houston's ear. "We tould tut her duts out." He spoke loud enough that all could hear.

Levi scooped him up. "Bartholomew, that's enough!"

Henry took Houston's shoulder. "Work on the 'ain'ts', Son. Isn't proper English. So you're good with your sister going?"

"Better! I'm great with it." He stuck the tip of his tongue out at her and waved her off. "Good riddance."

The smallest grabbed his daddy's hat and sat it on his own head. "And me, too, Untle Henwee. Bonnie tan doe, me don't tare."

"Why, thank you, Bart." The youngest daughter spread it on thick.

Charley stepped up. "Me and the boys have some big plans of our own for while you're gone, Uncle Henry. You'll be right pleased when you get back."

Bonnie beamed. "Can I then? Can I? I can be packed in no time."

Mary pointed at her carpet bag. "Bonnie, I put your things in my grip just in case."

The eight-year-old jumped up and down and clapped. "So yahoo, yay, and hip hip hooray. This is the best." She hugged May. "Well, come on, what are we waiting for?"

Henry looked to his wife, who smiled, then back to his baby girl. "Lots of boring travel time, better than a month on the water each way. Promise you'll be really good?"

"Yes, sir. I promise."

He closed his eyes and against his better judgment opened his mouth. "Fine." His gut in knots, he couldn't stand the thought of

leaving Mary Rachel there. Getting her away from that young man for a while was exactly why he'd agreed to let the girls go.

Now she'd be there. With the boy.

He didn't like it.

Bonnie flung herself into his arms. "Oh, thank you, Daddy. Thank you so much." She dropped down then launched herself onto her new mother. "Thank you, Mama, this is going to be so much fun. I love you very much."

Henry caught the disappointing smirks of Gwendolyn and Cecelia, but let them pass. Bless God, he could stand anything for seven months.

Couldn't he?



Seven hours later, about the time the Buckmeyers changed stages in Mount Pleasant, and sixteen miles north by northwest as the turkey vultures soar from where Just Mary sat in her room dreaming about her future, the object of her affection worked hard skidding black walnut saw logs back to his cabin.

Caleb checked behind. The timber was almost in place. Two more steps, then he eased his mule to a stop. He hopped down then rubbed the old boy's near ear. "You sure are a good mule."

The rattle of trace chains turned him. "Well, look here what the cat drug in."

He unhooked the mule and led him to the barn's corral; got back before Lanelle had the brake set on her wagon. "She didn't go."

He nodded. "You sure? Saw it with your own eyes?"

"Yep." She stood and threw him a smirk. "Help me down."

"Sure." He stepped toward her with his hands held out; she fell into them. He caught her then twirled her around as she wrapped her arms around his neck. He set her on the ground and stepped back a bit.

Business first. "Anyone see you turn on my road?"

"No, but what difference does it make? I'm only bringing supplies for my kin."

"True, you get it all?"

"A sack of sugar, bit of salt and a pound of coffee, but you best get yourself to town. Old man Hobbs would like a word with you. He wasn't too happy when I told him it was for you."

Caleb nodded toward his wagon. "I should have this lumber loaded by Saturday. I'll see to it then."

She shrugged then turned and moseyed toward the cabin. "That last batch of shine any better?"

Heading the opposite direction toward the well, he soon went to cranking; retrieved the jug, pulled the cork, and sipped a taste, then extended it to his cousin. "You tell me."

Always a sight to behold, she approached him and accepted the jug without an ounce of pretention. She licked her lips, took a short pull, and wiped her mouth. "Boogers, Caleb." She grinned then got herself a real drink. "I'd say that may be the best you've cooked yet."

He took the jug back and sipped a bit more. It burned all the way down. Replacing the cork, he nodded toward the cabin. "You got time?"

She reached for the moonshine. "Depends?"

He twisted away. "On what?"

"You really going to marry that Buckmeyer girl?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Her daddy ain't going to like it one bit. He's liable to cut her off, then where you gonna be?"

"I got it all worked out, and if you do like I say, it'll work out for you, too, cousin of mine."

She stepped close, put one hand on his chest, the other on the jug. "How so?"

"Come on inside, and I'll tell you."

She pulled back, taking the jug with her. "You got one of these for me?"

"Course, but you best not tell Auntie where you got it if she catches you."

She shook her head. "Don't worry about her. You best be hoping Pappy don't ever find out what we been doing all these years."



Henry didn't much cotton to the way things turned out, but mercy, Mary-no-more-Rachel was pert near grown, and even though almost as pigheaded as her mother, she also had plenty of him; a good level head on her shoulders.

No doubt she'd missed the advantage of a mother the last six years, important years for a young lady, but she'd had Rebecca.

That Caleb, though. Something about the boy troubled Henry, but he sure seemed to be in love. Quite the gentleman, too, or so it seemed.

Been coming every Saturday, and never even a hint of him wanting to slip Mary Rachel off. Didn't have a problem sleeping in the bunk house with John Paul's cousins either.

Henry figured that might run him off first time, but everyone seemed to speak highly of the young man.

The stage swayed extra big. May bumped his shoulder hard, way harder than necessary. "Cheer up, Mary Rachel will be fine."

He glanced across the coach; all three of his babies were reading books. The two pilgrims in the middle seats were engrossed in a card game. He hated traveling.

"I know." He leaned in close and kissed his wife's cheek then put his mouth to her ear. "But I still hate her backing out at the last minute."

She nodded then kissed him back. "If those two yaps couldn't steal Laura from Levi and Wallace, Caleb doesn't stand a chance."

"I don't know. That young man is way smarter than that lovesick Comanche. You've seen how smitten Mary Rachel is."

She poked him in the ribs. "Stop being a worry wart. Everything will be fine. You've reared a wonderful, smart young lady. She's got a level head like her daddy."

He smiled, didn't tell her he'd just thought the same thing. But he still hated it all to blue blazes that she was home and not with him. On the bright side, so far Bonnie had been great. He chuckled.

She elbow poked him. "What?"

"Oh, just thinking how good Bonnie's being, then compared it to how Houston would have been."

May laughed. "Oh, dear Lord have mercy! Can you imagine taking our little wild man all the way to London?"

"No, getting him to church of a Sunday is bad enough."

Finally arriving in Little Rock, Arkansas, he procured two rooms in a boarding house. Sure beat a night in the stage. He wanted to get there, so he could get home, but being stupid about it wouldn't help.

The next evening in Memphis's fancy hotel—the exact same one he and Sue spent their wedding night in, though he failed to mention that fact to May—once he finally got to lay it down for the night, his new wife surprised him. In a rather nice way.

She draped her housecoat over the side chair then slipped into bed and snuggled next to him. "I've decided I don't want to go to North Carolina. We can go straight on to New York from here, should save us a few days."

He rolled onto his side. "Why, I thought you wanted to show us Sea Side?"

She nodded then pressed her forehead against his chest. "I wanted to buy it back." Though muffled a bit, her words were still understandable.

"Do you know the folks who bought it?"

She rose a bit, tears welling in her eyes. "No, but it doesn't matter now."

Women. Would he ever understand them?

“What’s wrong, May?”

“I don’t want to go anywhere near the place.” She sniffed. “I wanted to buy it, so I could burn it to the ground.” She sniffed again. “It was the commodore’s grand achievement, his pride and joy, and I wanted to destroy it, but now....” She smiled and scooted closer and kissed him.

“Now what?”

Leaning back, she stared into his eyes. “I’ll let the Lord deal with him. I’ve got you and our babies and the best home anyone could ever want. Sea Side is just another plantation.”

“New York it is.” He kissed her back. What was it about this hotel? Maybe he should buy the place? But that thought vanished.

Oh, how he did love his new wife.



Love was on Mary Rachel’s mind the next morning. All night, she had waited for the big clock to strike three. Once it finally did, she slipped the saddle bags from under her bed and tiptoed down the stairs. With each step, her heart rate quickened until she reached her daddy’s library.

She almost knocked, so strong was her desire to follow his rules. But even stronger, her love for Caleb. He said he would come back for her if she didn’t want to go, and they could marry in two years. It sounded like a lifetime. Anything could happen in two years.

No, she’d decided for sure and for certain. She wanted him now.

Once inside, she silently closed the door then lit the lamp and eased into his room. Slowly she spun the dial on the safe in his oversized water closet. When the final number fell into place, and the handle unlatched the door, she remembered to breathe. Excellent, he hadn’t changed the combination.

She retrieved her strong box, slipped the key in, and pried the lid open. Right there exactly as she’d seen the last time, one hundred twenty dollar gold pieces. She carefully counted them out. Then there beneath the gold, bank notes lined the box’s bottom.

Where had those come from?

Pulling out the green backs, she counted them; five hundred and forty-two dollars. With no idea when Daddy had put that in there for her, she decided it made no difference. God sent the money knowing she’d need it. That would buy an extra ton of trade goods, if Caleb had it figured right.

Stuffed the bills and coins in the saddle bag, half on each side under what few clothes she’d managed to pack. Then on second thought, decided to put the bills in her stockings. Maybe she’d hang

onto the notes as a reserve. Caleb already knew about the coins, but sure would be fun to be able to produce extra money if the need arose.

Carefully, she locked the safe back then headed to his desk and retrieved the Baby Paterson he kept just behind the middle drawer. Surely her daddy wouldn't begrudge her the loan of some fire power, would he?

Should she leave a note?

With the pistol carefully stowed in the right hand side of the bag, and the lantern out, and her eyes well readjusted, she eased out the front door.

New Blue stretched and greeted her. She responded giving his ear a good rub then strolled around the house to the barn. He trotted beside her.

Enough moonlight to barely see by, she lit a candle in the barn then blew it out as soon as she'd found what she needed. Shortly, her daddy's horse stood saddled and ready to go.

She led him to the far end of the barn then east, until out of earshot of the house. After only two tries, she got herself in the saddle.

"Go home, Newly! Go on."

Been a long time since she sat a horse, but once she got her dress straightened out, she clucked him into an easy trot. Wouldn't do to spend the animal without reason.

Always best to keep a little in reserve just in case something happened. Rose had taught her that. Goodness, what would she do if Indians stole her? Her heart beat a little faster, and she kept a steady scan on both sides of the pasture.

But nothing happened.

Just like she and Caleb had planned, she beat the stage to Titus's Trading Post in Mount Pleasant. And of course, no problem; her father's old friend would be more than happy taking care of The Black until someone came for him.

She hated lying, but no one needed to know her plans, not yet. Soon enough, she'd be Mis'ess Caleb Wheeler, and then, there would not be one thing anyone could do about it.

Praise the Lord that He arranged her Daddy going off to Europe right at the perfect time.

A part of her hated doing things this way, but he would never have agreed. And she could never have snuck off with him there either. Yes, sir, everything worked out just fine.

She couldn't wait to get to Jefferson!

Chapter



Thirty-one

Caleb looked around the hotel room. All of his cousin's things were packed in her bag. He extended his hand, Lanelle took it, and he pulled her to her feet. "You best get gone. Your ship's going to sail without you."

She put both hands on his chest then pecked him on his lips. "Let's just wait and see if she's on the stage first. No need to get all hasty."

"She will be here, just like we planned."

She kissed him again, this time with more passion. "You don't know for sure. A thousand things could happen."

"I do know."

"How?"

"She loves me, and you should have seen the look in her eyes when I told her I'd come back in two years to marry her then if she'd wait for me."

She backed away and glared. "Do you love her?"

"Some. Maybe a little."

"And how's your little plan going to work if she couldn't get to her money, huh?"

"Then she can't go, but she'll have it, don't you worry. All one hundred beautiful gold coins."

"And when are you going to tell her that I'm coming along, too?"

He smiled. "I've thought about that. Not until after we're married. Sometime between here and New Orleans I figured I'll mention we're meeting up with you."

"I still can't believe you're marrying the little princess. And I don't understand why you think it's all necessary. We should forget about her once we have her money. That's all we need to..."

He put a finger on her mouth. "No, we need her compliance; we need her in California, and there's no way she'd make the trip with me without wearing my name. Quit fretting over it. John swears we can sell about anything a miner needs for five, six times what it's going for here."

"Sometimes my brother stretches the truth a little."

“Sometimes a lot, but I’ve read the news coming out of California; and it’s true. There’s so much gold, the miners have gone plum crazy.” He pulled her to him and wrapped his arms around her. “I love you, Lanelle.”

She leaned back. “More than Miss Prissy Buckmeyer?”

“Of course, I’ve loved you forever.”

She glanced at the hotel bed. “Show me.”



Taking the train from Memphis to New York convinced Henry he needed to sell The Belle and buy a railroad, or at least some train stock. He still hated traveling, but trains beat stagecoach almost as much as stages beat wagons. New York proved to be nothing like he’d ever seen, a bit like New Orleans, but with more energy.

More dandies and ladies dashing about, bigger homes, nicer carriages, and fancier horses, too, except he still hadn’t ever seen one he’d trade The Black for. And May’s house—right there in the big middle of the biggest town in all of America—did more than amaze him. After such opulence, how could she...? He smiled at her. She was a different woman now.

Pleased him how the Lord had plucked her from the midst of all this and brought her all the way to Texas. And just for him because of His great love for Henry.

He loved how God did things. The Almighty knew exactly the kind of lady he needed, and bless His name, He’d helped her to open her heart, given her the will to accept the Lord’s salvation.

Thank you, Father, for keeping her pure and bringing her to me.

For the first three days in the big city, his new wife avoided going to her publisher’s building. She wanted to show him and the girls all the sights, take in a play on Broadway, eat in all her favorite restaurants, see it all first, then take care of her business. Least, that’s what she kept saying.

And there was some surprise she kept hinting at, but never came right out with what. Women—especially his new wife—remained such a conundrum. Nice in so many ways, but still, a mystery.

And he couldn’t be sure he’d ever be able to solve it either. Sure did love walking those busy boardwalks with her on his arm though.

On the fourth morning there, after his daily trip to the little bakery on the corner—he should have insisted Jewel and Chester come along—May sprung her surprise on him and caught him unaware.

She sat at her big desk, the one she’d written most of her novels on, grinning ear to ear.

He put the sack of sweets down, her obvious joy infectious.
“What’s that all about?”

“You. Us. Me.” Her eyes sparkled, and if her grin got any bigger it might split her face right in two.

He laughed out loud. Couldn’t help himself. She was being so adorably cute. Then it hit him like a summer storm on the Texas prairie. “May? Are you?”

“Yes.” A lone tear rolled from her eye. The happiest little tear he’d ever seen. “I am.”

“For sure? You’re certain?”

“Yes, sir. Today is the second month I’ve missed and I never ever miss. I’m sure Houston’s not going to be the Buckmeyer baby anymore.”

In spite of his misgivings, he whooped. Running around the desk, pulled her to her feet and gently wrapped his arms around her. He lifted her from the floor and swung her around. “How wonderful. I love you so, Mis’ess Buckmeyer....”

She hugged him back, her face snuggled into his neck, his shirt soaking in the happy tears. “Thank you.”

He leaned back and smiled, a bit perplexed. “For what?”

“Everything. Just every single thing, but mostly for loving me and holding out until I found the Lord and for giving me this baby. Oh, Henry, my life is so perfect.”

“Yes, mine too. Praise God, isn’t He so good?”

“He is great. I can hardly believe He loves me so, I don’t deserve —”

He put his finger to her full lips again, then kissed them. The elation lasted all the way to Wall Street, then first thing after she introduced him and the girls to her all-business-looking boss, her editor handed him two telegrams. He quickly scanned them. One from Levi, the other, his daughter.

To: Henry Buckmeyer C/O May Meriwether Buckmeyer, 26 Wall Street, New York, New York

From: Mary Buckmeyer Wheeler

Daddy,

I am so sorry it had to be this way. Stop

Caleb said he’d wait, but I couldn’t stand letting him going by himself. Stop

We are going to seek our fortune in California. Stop

I love you and will write soon as we’re settled. Stop

He handed the telegram to May. She studied it a minute then passed it to Gwendolyn who read it with a sister leaning over on both sides.

“She’s married!” All three of his daughters looked up to him.

“Oh, dear. Henry, we can cancel the trip, head out to California instead, talk some sense into her.”

Almost numb, he weighed the situation. Her mother’s sin all over again. How could it be? He blew out all the stale air in his lungs then cleared his throat. “No, there’s nothing we can do now. They’re married.” He closed his eyes.

Bless her, Father. Keep her safe, return her to me.

Had the judge voiced a similar prayer when Sue ran off to Texas?

May placed her hand on his arm. “Are you sure, dear? We can go straight home if you want.”

The editor’s eyes flashed. “But, May, everything has—”

Shutting the man’s mouth with a look, he took his wife’s hand and glanced at his girls, who all still stared up at him. Gazing into the most beautiful, intriguing eyes he’d ever known, he decided.

“No. She’s made her choice. We’re going on.”

“Are you sure, my love?”

He nodded. “Mary Rachel has sown to the wind. Hopefully, she won’t reap the whirlwind.”

THE END

Other Titles by Caryl McAdoo

Vow Unbroken

a historical Christian (western adventure) romance from Howard Books, Simon & Schuster division; Book One, a Texas Romance / ISBN 978-1-4767-3551-1 / ASIN B00DPM7UYY

Buy now! <http://www.amazon.com/Vow-Unbroken-Novel-Caryl-McAdoo-ebook/dp/B00DPM7UYY>

Susannah Baylor reluctantly hires Henry Buckmeyer in 1832 to help her along the Jefferson Trace, the hard stretch of land between her Texas farm and the cotton market, where she's determined to get a fair price for her crop. It's been a long, rough ten years and the widow's in danger of losing the land her husband and his brother left to her and the children, and she needs help to get both her wagons safely to Jefferson.

She knows Henry's reputation as a lay-about and is prepared for his insolence, but she never expects his good looks or irresistible, gentle manner. Soon they are entwined in a romantic relationship that only gets more complicated because Henry doesn't know God the way she does. Dangers arise on the trace—but none as difficult as the trial her heart is going through. Will Susannah and Henry's love overcome their differences?

And will she get her crop to market and sell it for enough to save her farm? In this heartening and adventurous tale, a young woman's fortitude, faith, and heart are put to the ultimate test.

(See 5-Star Review snippets in the front pages of *Hope Reborn*)

Hearts Stolen

a historical Christian (western adventure) romance; Book Two, a Texas Romance / ISBN 978-1-5003-3651-6 / ASIN B00NAXGAZI

Buy Now! <http://www.amazon.com/Hearts-Stolen-Texas-Romance-Book-ebook/dp/B00NAXGAZI>

Unbeknownst to loved ones, a headstrong young wife is snatched off the prairie by two Comanche braves, carried north of the Red River, and traded to their war chief for ponies. After five years, a small detail of Texas Rangers rides into camp, and she determines that day will bring freedom or death. She'll remain captive no more.

Sassy Nightengale almost gives up hope until a company of Texas Rangers rides into Bold Eagle's peace camp. She learns they've come for the negotiated exchange of stolen white women, except her name isn't on their list. Purposing in her heart to escape captivity with her blue eyed, four-year-old that day, the chief's third wife does everything she can think of to be noticed.

Famed Texas Ranger Levi Baylor spots the red-headed beauty and agrees to the war chief's price, adding his personal horse and weapon to the Republic's agents' offerings. The trade propels the couple on a trail of joy and sorrow. Sweet love blossoms but must be denied. His integrity and her faith in God keep them at arm's length, not even allowing a kiss. Sassy's still married to her son's father, and Levi's honor-bound to deliver her home—to her husband.

Can their forbidden love be made holy? God hates divorce. Will Nightengale relinquish his wife and son? Will Sassy and Levi find the redemption they search for their troubled souls?

(See 5-Star Reviews in the front pages of *Hope Reborn*)

Lady Luck's a Loser

a contemporary mature
inspirational romance; Book 1, an Apple Orchard Romance / ISBN
978-0-6159-9574-8 / ebook
ASIN B00JCC5YI0

Buy now! <http://www.amazon.com/Lady-Lucks-Loser-Apple-Orchard-ebook/dp/B00JCC5YI0>

Marge Winters answers the ad for manager at a Bed & Breakfast placed by a wealthy widower seeking a new wife. W. G. Preston, trying to avoid the dating game, hires eight diverse women to come live at the B&B and be themselves while he gets to know them. He soon realizes he can't take six months with all eight and devises a plan to eliminate one per month, leaving the decision to Lady Luck as he successfully has many times in his life.

The women compete to win his wedding ring. The widow grandmother Marge is witty and friendly, yet naive. Youngest, Vicki hides her enchanting vulnerability with a queenly persona. Audrey, a great listener and cook, can be quite moody. The cute Natalie has trouble making friends.

The beautiful Virginia harbors a secret, and energetic Holly lifts everyone's spirits, but ruined her wholesome image with breast implants paid for with Preston's signing bonus. Charlotte loves antiques, as did the first Mis'ess Preston, and Dorothy is quite a leader, but Preston isn't looking for a manager. He wants a wife.

Who will win his proposal?

Lady Luck's a Loser is an amusing character study that hooks readers through the depth provided to the cast, which enables the novel to avoid the pitfalls of *How to Marry a Millionaire* and *The Bachelor*. A difficult accomplishment, each of the key players can be distinguished from one another.

A Little Lower than the Angels

a Biblical fiction; Volume One of The Generations series ISBN 978-1502412270 / ebook ASIN B00P4UXEU4

Buy now! <http://www.amazon.com/Little-Lower-Than-Angels-Generations-ebook/dp/B00P4UXEU4>

Running three parallel storylines, *A Little Lower than the Angels* opens with the sacrifices offered to God by Adam and his two sons Cain and Abel. Everyone knows the story, but this novel brings it to life from a new perspective.

One story follows Cain after Abel's murder. He flees Adam's Valley with his sister Sheria traveling to the land of Nod, east of Eden. Marked and cursed as a vagabond, he becomes easy prey for Satan and his minions, ever moving further and further from the teachings of his father and obedience to God. (Scripture says he went to Nod with his wife, and that Eve is the mother of all the living, so she must be the mother of the woman Cain takes as his wife, making her his sister as well.)

Another tells of Abel's adventures in Paradise. He enters in at the death of his earthly flesh. Father God sends the first of the cherubim, a wonderful character named Namrel, to greet him and teach him, help him adjust to his new home. Abel meets the pets of his parents when they still lived in the Garden of Eden, Lion and Lamb, and Centurion, a captain of the host. He learns how earthly prayers loose the angels to war on earth's inhabitants' behalf—and how they fight.

Lastly, we remain in Adam's Valley and mourn with the bereaved parents facing the loss of their three children. He and Eve relive different times in their lives as God helps them to endure and brings them to repentance.

Coming Soon, God willing...

Then the Deluge Comes

a Biblical fiction; Volume Two of The Generations series ISBN 978-1503197459 / ebook ASIN xxx / March 6, 2015 God willing

Obedience assures the preservation of life. By Adam's death, evil rules the sons of Cain who fill the earth with their lasciviousness and violence. God declares He will not contend forever with man. But, Noah, the only one of the tenth generation to walk perfect before the Lord, hears His word.

MAKE THEE AN ARK OF GOPHER WOOD; ROOMS SHALT THOU MAKE IN THE ARK, AND SHALT PITCH IT WITHIN AND WITHOUT WITH PITCH

With the help of his father Lamech, and Grandfather Methuselah whose name foretells when the deluge will come, Noah and his three sons embark on the massive task of building the giant boat with no idea why except that God said to. As the vessel of their salvation nears completion, it becomes apparent Noah's sons need wives, but their mother left off bearing before birthing any daughters.

Evil, too, heard the word of the Lord, and Lucifer and his angels war in the Heavens to destroy the earth's inhabitants. With each child that is passed through the fire, their battle songs grow stronger.

Lamech journeys to the land of Nod to find suitable maidens for his three grandsons, but can he find anyone pure enough there? And where in all the world and Heaven is the Almighty to get enough water to float the ark, much less cover the face of the earth?

Sins of the Mothers

a historical Christian (western adventure) romance; Book Four, a Texas Romance / debuts May 3, 2015, God willing / ISBN 978-1503197541 / ebook xxx

True love mends what blind love has broken.

At much too tender an age, manipulated by her love for the older and handsome Caleb Wheeler, Mary Rachael defies her father, takes her inheritance, and sneaks off in the dark of morning to marry without her father's blessing.

She runs off to California to open a new business with her brand new husband and his cousin who's waiting there. Once she's far enough away that it's impossible for her daddy to send anyone after her, she telegraphs him in care of a New York publisher.

Her step-mother offers to cancel their trip and her book tour in Europe to return to Texas and retrieve the wayward eighteen-year-old, but her father, the renown Henry Buckmeyer knows the die is cast.

Already married, his firstborn has sown to the wind, and he can but pray she will not reap the whirlwind. However, that's exactly what the young bride encounters in the gold rush days of San Francisco.

After finding her husband is far from the man she thought he was, she's attracted to a successful business man who may even be worse. By a quirk, she's partnered with the one man who has the heart to redeem her, but he rubs her wrong at every turn.

Doomed to repeat the sins of her mother and grandmother, will Mary Rachel Buckmeyer Wheeler ever find her way back home and be reconciled with her daddy? Or is it too late?

Sing a New Song

a contemporary Christian Texas romance / June, 2015 / Mary Ester, disillusioned with singing God's praises on the road, decides to go home to Red River County and runs into the man who'd been in the same first grade class and her best friend until he kissed her.

Token of the Covenant

a Biblical fiction; volume three of The Generations series / planned debut, July 7, 2015 / Noah & Hattimas, Japheth, Ham, and Shem work on the ark tending God's animals thinking anyone can stand forty days and forty nights. They hope Noah heard right and the rain would stop. At last, that they could return to living on dry ground, but they discover that's only the beginning of their time on the ark.

Daughters of the Heart

a historical Christian Texas Romance, Book Five / September 1, 2015 / Gwendolyn, Cecelia, and Bonnie are coming of age and the young men are coming courting from all over the state, but after seeing how devastated their father was when Mary Rachel ran off, the sisters enter into a pact never to break his heart.

Promise of Blessings

a Biblical fiction; volume four of The Generations series / planned debut November 2, 2015 / Abraham and Sarah, Ishmael, and Isaac

Son of Many Fathers

a historical Christian Texas romance; Book Six / January, 2016 / Charley Nightengale comes home from the Civil War to find Lacey has run off, heading out to join the People of her father and takes out alone after her.

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Praying my story gives God glory! ☐
Blessings, Caryl